

~ Last Night I Dreamt I Went to Summerland Again ~

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~ Last Night I Dreamt I Went to Summerland Again ~

by [Spiced_Wine](#)

Summary

At the Monument, after Dagor Dagorath, Vanimóre wakes from a dream. Anything is better than doing nothing and so he returns to the world beyond to Summerland — to help a son and mother fled from a life of abuse and bullying.

But things are never as straightforward as they seem....

Notes

This is not set in the 'Summerland' 'verse. This is an AU. Summerland, and all Vanimóre's homes exist across the multiverse.

Writing this due to a niggling feeling that needs exploring.

Mention of canon characters who may later make an appearance. Mention of a character having been raped. Mention of bullying and abuse.

A few F-bombs.

~ The Refugees ~

Prologue.

OooOooO

~ There was once a young girl went on holiday as so many do, a rite of passage, to a place of sun and heat, nightlife and music. And, like so many, she met a man and slept with him. Neither thought of permanence, of a relationship. It was, then, simply *fun*. It lasted two nights and then he was gone. The girl hoped to see him again but his place was taken by another soon enough. This man was quite different but to the girl, raised in a quiet village, he was exciting. He was 'hard', tough, sporting a tattoo, shaven headed, handsome in a rough way. He knew what he wanted, and what he wanted was, it seemed, her.

She had just left home, living in Greater London, making friends, revelling in freedom, and yet she was afraid. Life had never prepared her for the world outside her peaceful village. This man, the second she slept with, promised strength, protection. She mistook his burly, loud-mounted confidence for safety and at least for a short time, was flattered by his protectiveness.

Three months later they were married. Her parents, old and old-fashioned, nevertheless respected him for wanting to marry her and 'give her a good name'. After the wedding, they gave her up as lost. She exchanged her pleasant shared apartment for a third-floor flat in an Enfield tower block. At night, sirens wailed, gangs roamed and glass shattered.

Chez was not, Julie learned protective. He was simply possessive. Born of poverty, he clung to anything that he thought belonged to him. For a few years, he held down a job in a warehouse as a packer, until an accident placed him on benefits. But he didn't want her to work. He didn't want her to go out. He was no great lover, as she later told her sister, but he liked to *control*. Everything she did, everything their son did. It was incremental, sly, developing over years until at times she stood in the shabby kitchen wondering how she had come to this pass, but lacking the strength to change it. He controlled. He took her money, regulated everything she did. As their son grew up, he began to control him too. Her Sam. She always thought of him as hers.

Sam was the only light in her life; and nothing like Chez who was built, as they said around there, like a brick shithouse. As he grew, tall and fair and slim, she knew that he was not Chez' son. Sam was as fair as she, thank god, but his face, his height and build came from his real father. To cover her tacks, she mentioned an uncle, also tall and slender, and Chez merely grunted. He knew nothing about her holiday fling and such was his sublime, brutish arrogance, it would never, Julie knew, occur to him that Sam was not his.

Julie's sister did not give up on her. She even visited in the first few years, sent gifts on birthdays and at Christmas, but Chez's attitude was chilling. He did not attempt to hide his dislike of Madge, called her an 'interfering bitch'. The visits ceased, as did the phone calls, crushed into non-existence by the constant bullying and denigration which, if it did not always explode into violence,

was always there, a threatening cloud.

Sam first spoke of leaving when he was thirteen and Julie desperately wanted him to. She thought of sending him to his aunt, but how? Chez controlled all their finances and Madge had moved. Worn down by constant stress, Julie could not even remember where. She thought it was back to their home village, but where? Later, she hoped Sam would leave home when he finished school; despite the fact that he was bullied, he had done well in his exams. His intelligence too, did not come from Chez.

Except Sam wouldn't leave her. Rather than that, he shelved his quiet dreams and took a job set up for him by Chez, at the grimy bookmakers in the hopeless little row of local shops where the signs hung askew and groups of hooded youths gathered until the rare police cars caused them to scatter, jeering.

Chez controlled Sam's money too, adding it to his own benefit, and spending Much of it at the bookmakers. When he sent her shopping, he demanded the bill, and any money left over went back in his pocket. At Christmas, he dumped an Argos catalogue in front of her and told her to choose something, no more than ten pounds, for Sam.

The last four or five years something had changed in him. Perhaps, as he claimed, his accident at work had indeed damaged something in his brain. He had always parroted the worse Far Right views, but these became more extreme. She heard from Sam that he had joined some scummy little group, the Lions of England, and she might have laughed had she felt there was any humour in the situation. Sam, meanwhile, expressed political and social views so far removed from Chez's that she wondered where he got them from. But he did not air them after the first explosion from Chez, resulting in his knocking her against the wall in his anger. Sam had pulled him away, eyes blazing in a white face, and received a fist to the jaw. He was only eighteen.

After that, theirs was an understanding of silence. It broke her heart to watch Sam grow and yet go nowhere. In this place, among such people, he was like a gilded lily wasting in a communal tip.

But still, she lacked the resolution and (most importantly) the money to disengage herself. Until that day. And she did not leave for herself, but for her son.

OooOooO

~ The Refugees ~

Last night I dreamt I went to Summerland again.

Vanimöre dreamt that he walked the the empty rooms, shrouded with dust-covers, that he went out of the front door and into the gardens through the scented moonlight — down to where the sea beat and sighed against the rock promontory. He dreamt that he heard someone running through the pines, someone who needed his help. There was a flicker of pale hair in the dusk, mocking laughter from the shadows...

He opened his eyes.

The dead wind clawed at the window, blew ochre dust in a veil across the no-land. *Gone, gone.* It seemed to mourn and mock him both.

He rose, turned his back on the window, the desolation beyond. His heart slowly lessened its frantic beat. He poured wine and drank it.

Summerland. It existed in so many worlds. Locked up now, its rooms quiet, dust lazily spiralling in the still air, the fading scent of potpourri lingering. He thought it had served its purpose once he had given Claire James his blood and had left it, he and Vanya both. And then had come Dagor Dagorath, the destruction of a universe and all he had loved — and the creation of new ones. In those, Summerland was still there, as were all his homes, his wealth. His life — or rather lives — there on hold.

Dreams were often ambiguous; he trusted more in visions. But, he thought, with an internal sigh, better to do something than sit here as the universes spun on their way. Which one though? Which one? He closed his eyes.

The one where I am needed.

OooOooO

~ ‘Oh, there is something, sir.’ Her housekeeper folded her hands. ‘If you have time.’

‘Yes, Mrs Mitchell?’ Vanimöre picked up a glass of champagne and sipped. Summerland dreamed under the spring sun. Wood pigeons called sleepily from the shade. The sea-breeze roused a faint, continuous sigh from the trees.

‘I bumped into Madge in the shop a couple of days ago—’

Vanimöre sat back, waiting. Mrs Mitchell was a garrulous, good natured woman but was always a little wary around him. He had employed her last autumn on his return to Summerland, and she insisted on calling him ‘Sir.’

‘Well, Madge has a sister who married some — in Madge’s words — some pig of a man years ago. Julie, her sister’s name is, she’s left him, and her son too. *He* got her away, Mage said. He’s a violent man, the husband I mean, involved in one of those Far Right parties.’ She sniffed in disapproval. ‘You know, leftover football hooligans.’

Vanimöré nodded. 'I know the type.'

'Well, Julie's got nowhere to go, so Madge put her and the boy up in one of their caravans. She's broke. Financial abuse they call it, don't they? as well as physical. I saw Julie, just for a moment. She's a few years younger than Madge, but she looks older. And she had a black eye.'

'I see.'

Mrs Mitchell was getting into her stride now. 'According to Madge, the boy refused to leave home because he knew it meant his mum would bear the brunt of the abuse. There were marks on him, too. He got them both out of the house while his father was in the pub. Madge picked them up from Plymouth and brought them here.'

'Go on.'

'It's this way, sir: The boy knows the Lawsons can't afford to give them the caravan for nothing; they only have eight, after all, and Madge told *me* that if you didn't own the land and practically give it to them for a pittance, they wouldn't be able to keep going. It's very quiet area, isn't it, sir? It'll take time for the Lawsons to make a profit. So, the young man wants to work, to pay proper rent.' Her kind little eyes blinked rapidly.

'And?' But he smiled.

She took a long breath and rushed on. 'Well, sir, I was thinking...Jimmy came to me on Wednesday when you were in London, *very* regretfully telling me he would have to give his notice in. You know that his wife had cancer?' Vanimöré nodded; it had been while he was 'away'. 'She's clear now, but Jimmy wants to retire, spend time with her, go on holiday. He's almost seventy. He means to talk to you tomorrow.'

'I understand. You think that this boy might take his place?' Jimmy Loudon had been taken on as a gardener by the previous owners, and Vanimöré had retained him, but in fact he did any odd job that was required, could turn his hand to almost anything.

'Only you can say, sir, but he's young and strong. Nice boy. wanted to train to be an actor, you know, but his father made it impossible, and again, he wouldn't leave his mum. He seems like a decent lad. Trustworthy.' She twisted her hands a little anxiously. 'Don't *tell* anyone sir, but Madge reckons that the father isn't, if you see what I mean.' Her voice lowered confidentially, though there was no-one in the house but they two. 'Julie had a fling with someone she met on holiday before she got together with this Chez, her husband. *He* doesn't know, of course, nor does the son.'

'From what you have told me, Mrs. Mitchell, that is not something the boy need shed any tears over.'

'Well, that's true enough, sir,' she snorted in agreement. 'But there's another thing.' She came a little closer. At no time did she ever come within three feet or so of him. Partly it was nerves and partly because she felt it was not her place. Vanimöré sipped his champagne. 'Do go on.'

She cleared her throat. 'Well, sir, it seems that the boy is — ' Her voice dropped even more dramatically: '*Bisexual*. Now, our Suzie's girl down in Torquay, our Lucy, *she's* the same. Likes men and women both.' Her eyes widened; a little proud, she was, of knowing the terms and what they meant and it gave her a pleasant *frisson* to be acquainted, even by remove, with these modern sexual mores. There were, Vanimöré knew, enough rumours about *him* in the village. He hid a

smile.

'I can imagine how that must have gone down at home,' he said dryly. 'Well, I shall call on Madge tomorrow, Mrs. Mitchell, after I talk to Jimmy. If he gives his notice in, then the young man can begin as soon as he likes. Perhaps I will see him when I call on Madge.' It didn't matter much if the boy was completely useless; anyone could be taught.

Mrs. Mitchell beamed. 'I did wonder that it might cause some bad feeling in the village; everyone knows how well you pay, sir. But the boy's family, really,' said Madge's aunt-by-marriage, comfortably.

'He is. Don't worry about it Mrs. Mitchell. I am more than happy to employ him.'

Pleased, she bobbed her head. 'Oh, sir, his name's Sam, by the way. Samuel.' She bustled away. Her job was easy, allowing her to speak of 'my house', and to take pride in her position. 'Nanny', who was currently away on what was (ostensibly) a holiday was not so much employed as a permanent fixture. There had been talk, before he left, of Nanny being too old to keep up her work, and that perhaps Summerland needed a full-time housekeeper who would also keep Nanny company while Mr. Steele was away.

And so, a couple of weeks later, even though 'Nanny' was away indefinitely, Mrs. Gwendoline Mitchell was employed. She always wore a navy blue ensemble and white blouse (paid for by Vanimöré) as if to emulate the housekeepers of earlier times and she much enjoyed the status. She was a good-natured gossip, but close-lipped when it came to Vanimöré— then again, so was everyone in the area.

Is this it? Vanimöré wondered. Is this why I came?

He had done nothing since returning but catch up with business and Apollyon Enterprises. Apathy still weighed on him like a mountain of stone. He talked to the cleaners, to Mrs. Mitchell, to his gardener; he went out sometimes, driving without destination. Waiting. If he was supposed to be here, the reason would reveal itself.

Perhaps, now, it had.

OooOooO

Jimmy Louden promised he would stay on for a week or so to see 'how the new lad does.' His erstwhile possessive attitude at 'Some stranger comin' in here and usin' my stuff' considerably softened by the golden handshake Vanimöré gave him for his years of service. His weathered face turned the colour of a brick and his eyes moistened. Vanimöré knew that while he and his wife had hoped they would not be left with nothing more than their state pensions and their savings, they did not rely on it. Coughing, wiping his nose and mouth with a handkerchief, Jimmy sought for words. Vanimöré poured him a snifter of brandy. He was a proud older man, and Vanimöré did not expect or want grovelling thanks.

'There's no-one in the village you were thinking of? Someone who might take over from you?' he inquired, knowing there was not. Most of the young men worked on the land hereabouts, those who had not moved away to university or the cities. There were a couple of well-to-do people who's income was internet-based, a few younger couples who commuted into Plymouth or Taunton, some incomer-retirees, but unemployment was not a problem in the area.

‘There isn’t sir, no,’ Jimmy said regretfully. ‘Not since young Nathan went of to university. Well, we’ll see what this lad’s like. I’ll keep an eye on him for a while, and I dare say I can always pop in.’

‘I hope you do,’ Vanimöré smiled. ‘But don’t worry about it. Mrs. Mitchell told me you wanted to go on holiday.’

Jimmy rolled his eyes, grinning. ‘Eileen always said she wanted to see places, you know, sir. Paris, Rome. One of those coach trips. Well, we’ve the time now, and the money, though I’d just as soon go down to St. Ives or somewhere, and have a decent beer.’ He coughed again with embarrassment. ‘But I promised her when she got better we’d go, and so we shall. Just you give me a ring when the lad starts and I’ll come on down.’ He went off with a sprightly gait, and Vanimöré walked down to the beach, along the sands and up into the Lawson’s small caravan park.

Madge Lawson was pleasantly flustered when he knocked at their back door, inviting him in to her sunny kitchen and pouring them both coffee. She flushed when he told her why he had come. ‘Oh. Oh, well. Gwen Mitchell shouldn’t have said anything, Mr. Steele! But I know Sam *does* want a job.’ She took a drink of her coffee. ‘He’s nothing like Chez, his...his father.’

‘Who might not be his father?’ Vanimöré suggested.

Madge squeaked. ‘Honestly! Gwen has a mouth on her! But, well, *no*. Julie thinks the father is a man she met in Ibiza. Just a holiday fling.’ She shrugged. ‘She was only eighteen.’

He lifted a hand. ‘It matters nothing to me, Madge. If he is willing to learn the work and is trustworthy.’ He bought out his phone. ‘Let me at least cover the cost of the caravan for you.’

‘There’s no need, Mr. Steel. Julie’s my sister, for god’s sake!’ Madge lifted her hands. ‘And the boy’s quite proud. He *wants* to work. He’s a clever boy, he’s just never been able to do anything.’

Vanimöré smiled. ‘I appreciate that he wants to earn a wage, so don’t tell him. But you should not be out of pocket on this.’

She subsided as he transferred the money into her bank account, but her brow puckered with worry. ‘Mr. Steele. I’m...worried about him! Julie told me what happened. And I think it’s a police matter, but Julie almost had hysterics when I suggested it.’ She clasped her hands around her coffee mug. ‘It’s criminal and —’

The kitchen door opened to admit a young man. The flooding sun brightened his cap of hair to palest gold.

‘Madge,’ he began. ‘I — ‘ and then stopped, staring. ‘Oh, I’m sorry, I didn’t know you had company.’

‘Sam.’ Madge got up. ‘This is Mr. Steele.’

‘How do you do?’ Vanimöré murmured, somewhat startled. He had the impression, from Mrs. Mitchell’s words, that the boy would scarcely be out of his teens, but Samuel was a young man; no more than mid twenties, but certainly no boy. He as very tall and slim and fair. His face was lovely, beautiful rather than handsome, but with a firm jaw. His head was crowned by loose, thick curls of hair and the eyes were a pale and startling grey under brows and lashes of a darker brown.

Altogether he looked like an angel, and could have had a career as a model or dancer; there was strength there in the sinewy arms and wide, flat shoulders. There was also a fading bruise like a shadow on the smooth jaw and anger spiked upward within Vanimöré. He could not stand bullies; had no time for them.

‘How do you do?’ Sam replied. ‘I’m...Sam.’ He looked at his aunt, then back toward Vanimöré. ‘I can come back, if—’

‘There is no need,’ Vanimöré interrupted him. ‘We were talking of you. I understand that you want a job while you’re here? As it happens, my gardener is retiring.’

‘I’m afraid I don’t know much about gardens,’ Sam replied apologetically. ‘We lived in a tower block. But I...I could learn,’ he added eagerly, and looking very young. ‘I’ll try anything.’

‘Jimmy, my gardener, has said he will train you for a couple of weeks.’ Vanimöré finished his coffee. ‘Perhaps you would like to come over now and have a look around?’

‘Yes, of course.’

‘I walked.’ Vanimöré lead the way down to the beach. ‘There’s a shortcut to Summerland. I don’t encourage people to use it, but those I know and trust are welcome.’

‘Summerland,’ Sam repeated. ‘I remember mum talking about it sometimes, and its rich, reclusive owner.’ He sent a shy, small smile.

‘Not that reclusive; I just prefer a...er...quiet life.’

The sea lipped the sand, creamed in tiny wavelets and withdrew. Seagulls wheeled overhead, calling their raucous lament to the tides.

‘It’s so beautiful here,’ Sam murmured. ‘So peaceful. I never realised anywhere could be so *quiet*.’

‘Could you not sleep?’ Vanimöré smiled.

‘Not very well. But not because of that.’

‘Where did you live?’

‘Enfield.’ Vanimöré knew it from his times of living as a homeless person in London. A ‘sink’ estate, starved of funding; not the worse, but a million miles from here and from Summerland.

‘You do not sound like a Londoner,’ he observed. ‘You’re very well-spoken.’

‘I did sound like one when I was younger.’ A disarming grin. ‘But just to blend in. Mum never liked it; she doesn’t have an accent either, like Madge. And well — when I was young, I had dreams of becoming an actor. I wanted an RP accent. So I copied Mum and people on t.v. And I wanted to sound nothing like *him* and his mates. He hated it of course, my la-di-da accent, he called it.’ He shrugged. ‘In the end I couldn’t leave my mother. I suppose they’ll have told you why we’re here, Mr. Steele? She tried to protect me when I was young, so how *could* I leave her with him?’ He looked straight ahead. ‘I wish I had now, and made some money to get her out of there.’

'Tell me if I am impertinent,' Vanimöré began, gently. 'But why did she remain?'

Sam frowned. 'Why do abused people *ever* stay with their abusers?' he demanded angrily, throwing out his hands. 'She made excuses for him years ago but not...not lately. And where could she go? You know how it is — or perhaps you don't. There are so few women's refuges and she had no money. And she wouldn't tell Madge. She thought...' He breathed heavily through his nose. 'I'm sorry, how could you know what it's like?'

Thou wouldst be surprised, Vanimöré thought. 'There's no need to apologise.'

'He didn't want her to work, maybe meet someone else.' Sam passed his fingers through his gleaming curls. 'I went to work when I was sixteen, at a Bookmakers,' he said definitely. 'Friends of his — and he — are always in there, keeping an eye on me, making sure I say nothing. The manager is one of them, a Far Right party. Lions of England.' He laughed scornfully. 'They're just thugs, failures, bullies who hang around together and dream of lynching anyone not like them.' Colour flooded into his cheeks. 'And I'm *not* like them, although you might be amazed how many...h-homophobes are so far in the closet they can't see daylight and *still* wouldn't mind being serviced in a pub toilet.'

Vanimöré directed him to the half-hidden steps that climbed the Summerland promontory. 'No,' he said mildly. 'I have seen a little of the world. I know that is true.'

Shade fell over them. Sam said, 'I'm talking too much, I know. And I'm sorry. I just...' A small laugh. 'Never had anyone to talk to. Even on the internet. He used it, yes, but didn't want us to. He would take our phones, to see what we'd been looking at, and if he went out, he'd take them with him. I hid my browsing history and showed Mum how to do the same. But still. If he even suspected...it was worse for her than for me. At least after a while, when I began to stand up to him. But...'

'If you don't mind me asking: what precipitated this flight?' *Yes, thou art talking too much to a complete stranger.* And Vanimöré was encouraging it, a gentle assertion of power.

Sam looked over his shoulder, said briefly: 'He's got worse in the last year.'

They reached the top of the steps, came out of the screening trees and the landscaped gardens of Summerland spread before them. The house fronted the sea; to the rear an avenue of pines hid the mansion from the drive, but the south-facing lawns were a sun-trap, a riot of colour. Wisteria was in bloom, voluptuous clouds of purple, and the lawns were green velvet. Arches of budding roses clambered, and along the front terrace urns spilled ferns and flowers.

'Wow,' Sam said, his face glowing. 'This is...beautiful!' He smiled in delight.

'Come in.' Vanimöré lead the way around to a side door and the kitchen, then a tour through the house. He saw Sam's eyes widen and the tightening of his mouth as he was conducted from room to room. No doubt he was thinking of the unfairness that a few people possessed so much wealth. And it was unfair, Vanimöré admitted.

Back downstairs, he got the keys to Jimmy's work shed where the ride-on mower, the garden tools, seeds and compost were kept with an array of other implements, anything from ladders to shears to oil and wild bird food. Jimmy was methodical and his work-space neat.

'I've always wanted to use one of those.' Sam pointed at the mower.

'You'll have plenty of opportunities,' Vanimöré smiled. 'In the spring and summer, unless it's exceptionally dry, Jimmy likes to mow twice a week. well, what do you think?'

'I'd like the job.' Sam swallowed. 'Of course I would. I love the country, the sea. At least, I was never near either, but mum says it's in my blood. And I *need* the job. Madge is being very kind, but she can't keep us, I know. And my uncle...he's not keen at all on our being there.'

'Men, anything for an easy life,' Vanimöré quipped and earned a small laugh. 'Leave John to come around. He's a decent man.' *And so art thou.* There was a look about Sam as a caged animal who has been released into the world, all wide-eyed and uncertain. It seemed incredible that in this modern age he and his mother had be kept virtual prisoners out of fear but it happened; it was not impossible. And, naturally, those who had no money fared the worse. They had nowhere to go. 'Would you prefer cash-in-hand?' he asked. 'Jimmy always wanted a little from his pay as cash.'

Sam blushed again. 'I'll have to open a new bank account. Chez kept my bank cards.' Vanimöré raised his brows at that and Sam lowered his eyes. 'He wouldn't work. Or *couldn't* he said, He had an industrial accident when I was about six, which left him with neurological problems. But anyway, he said my money was for the house. He kept all our ID's, so we couldn't even go to the bank to withdraw money.' He stopped, breathless, and looked up, sparks of anger and shame in those striking light eyes, then swung away leaned his hands on the work bench. 'I'm sorry.'

'For what?'

The fair head shook. 'Madge would have a fit if she heard me talking to you like this.'

'Believe me or no, I know something about abuse.'

Sam turned slowly, eyes narrowed as if trying to bring Vanimöré into focus with the words. 'You do? *Do* you?' He shook his head again as if unable to believe it, rubbed his fingers over the old wood nervously. They were long-fingered, fine-boned hands. 'I think it must be delayed reaction, my talking, I mean, and to you...'

'Sometimes we all need to unburden.' He sent himself a wry inner smile. 'It's lunch time. Would you like something to eat?'

'It would be too much trouble. I ought to get back. Unless...there's something I can do?'

'Yes,' Vanimöré smiled. 'You can join me for lunch. Nanny, who does most of the cooking, is away, but I can throw something together.' He thought Sam must be wary of him and his curiosity grew. Who, he wondered, had propositioned him? Again, he reined in the desire to simply *look*. *No, let him tell thee.* And then it struck him, as they walked into the house, that Sam reminded him poignantly of someone who had never existed: He was like a young Elgalad; that lithe coltish grace, the beauty of his face. The thought made him stop suddenly, struck by pain that warped and twisted into rage at his own stupidity. Another life, another time, a universe that was gone forever.

He made a cold chicken salad, putting part-baked rolls in the Aga. Sam had a healthy enough appetite; was on the thin side, even, perhaps from constant stress or just not having enough to eat. He addressed his lunch silently, as if to balance his earlier talkativeness and a rosy flush mantled his cheeks. Vanimöré took a bottle of champagne from the fridge and the 'pop' of the cork startled Sam into spinning at his chair.

‘I hope you will join me?’ he said, pouring. ‘It seems appropriate: an escape from...bondage and a new job. Hopefully, a new life.’

‘Thank you.’ Sam sampled the bubbles. ‘I’ve never had champagne before. I hope so. Yes, a new life.’

‘Let’s sit outside,’ Vanimöré suggested, leading the way to the seats under the vine trellis. ‘It occurs to me you will have to apply for a copy of your birth certificate if you want to open a bank account, and then get a passport. You will need a couple of proofs of your identification. I can act as a guarantor.’

‘That’s very kind.’ Sam sipped at his drink. ‘I’ll have to see about the birth certificate tomorrow.’

‘In the meantime, I’ll pay you cash. If you need to purchase anything online or off, let me know.’

Sam stared at him. ‘I — I don’t understand why you would be so kind to a complete stranger,’ he burst out.

‘My dear boy, I am extremely rich and I see no point in having wealth if one does not help people.’ Vanimöré sat back. ‘And please do not take it into your head that you *owe* me anything for it. I am not going to bribe you into my bed, even if you *are* bisexual.’

Sam put down his glass, blushing furiously. ‘I didn’t...I’m sorry, I never meant that.’

‘But I think someone did try to bribe you or force you, no?’

Sam looked away, a pulse beating in his temples. His lashes were like feather fronds. It was hardly surprising some thuggish homophobe had been tempted.

‘Did your father know about it? Is that how he discovered you were not er...straight?’

‘Oh,’ Sam shifted uncomfortably. ‘No. I think he guessed from when I was in my teens. He used to take me to football sometimes, or to the bookmakers, and if we saw girls, women, he would make remarks.’ His mouth twisted. ‘Vile, sexist remarks, misogynistic. He called all women slags. I hated it, hated *him*. I never said anything because of Mum. His friends were just as bad. Although he didn’t *want* me to have a girlfriend. I might have got close enough to her to confide, to move out. And I would never have invited anyone back to the flat, anyhow. I didn’t trust him.’ His lovely eyes glanced back. ‘He started to talk about men, then...how gay people ought to be impaled, gang-raped.’ He shuddered as Vanimöré frowned. “‘Have their...cocks cut off and stuffed in their mouths,’”. That kind of thing. I never said anything about that either. If he attacked me, it was one thing, but my mother...?’ He picked up his drink again, finished it, and Vanimöré refilled their glasses.

‘I think it was about oh, the Christmas before last. A few days before. He had to go to Covent Garden to meet someone. The Christmas Market. Something to do with his bloody Lions of England.’ He grimaced. ‘It seemed a strange place to meet someone. He asked me to go with him. God knows why. Mum was in hospital. She had concussion after— *falling downstairs*, and had a broken arm. She — and he — said it was an accident. It wasn’t of course.’

Vanimöré said nothing; he waited.

‘I just had to wait for him, but it was wonderful, the market, it even *felt* like Christmas, something I’d never felt before. I couldn’t go far.’ His smile was bitter. ‘So I just people-watched, you know?’

Wished I could buy something and take it to the hospital.’ Vanimöré nodded.

‘A man came past, and stopped.’ He closed his eyes. ‘It was as if suddenly no-one else was there, they became background. He was so beautiful it hurt to look at him. He...’ Slowly, he turned his head opened his eyes, frowning. ‘He looked a little like *you*.’

Vanimöré said quietly, ‘What did he look like? Besides me, I mean?’

‘Black hair, long, in a man-bun.’ He sketched it with his fingers. ‘A long dark coat. He was about your height and he was very fair skinned, white-skinned, the same as you. It’s not something you often see...And his eyes, when he looked at me seemed almost silver.’

Maglor, Vanimöré thought with a flash and an ache. Pain and pleasure both. Of course *Maglor* was here, but Vanimörë had not sought him out. Not here.

Every possibility had happened *somewhere*, including a world where Vanimöré had followed Sauron willingly; a world where he had taken *Maglor* to Númenor, as he had been ordered. Or tried to, anyhow. After weeks of not speaking in Barad-dûr, on the road south to Umbar, *Maglor* had found his voice and sung. And, as Lúthien’s song had cast Angband into slumber, so had *Maglor*’s power felled his escort to sleep. When Vanimörë woke, *Maglor* had gone and the guards, superstitious, had to be threatened into searching for him. The Vanimörë of that world (this one) had wanted to find him because, in his twisted way, he had *cared*, even though he could protect him from Sauron’s worse depredations. He had felt the link between them, not knowing that it was rooted in shared blood.

Maglor had not been found, and Vanimörë died in Barad-dûr after the One Ring was cut from Sauron’s finger. It had been Glorfindel who, at last, slew him in Sauron’s throne hall.

Good riddance, Vanimöré had thought, and well done, Glorfindel. He was disgusted with his other self, but it meant that he could not search for *Maglor*, who remembered him with hatred. And yet...*I could help thee, Maglor*.

He turned his attention back to Sam, who was saying, ‘He looked apart from everyone. He looked how I felt. Lonely.’

Vanimörë nodded. *Of course he did*.

‘I...well, he looked around and saw me; he seemed to recognise — not me, but that I was lonely too, out of place, and then he walked away. I was disappointed, but a few minutes later he came back, carrying two glasses of mulled wine, and handed me one...We just stood there, drinking the wine, and began to talk. I’m not even sure what we said, but he asked me my name.’ He bent his head, traced the surface of the table. ‘It felt like magic, like being beside a living fire, and like starlight.’ He looked up, shamefaced. ‘You must think I sound stupid.’

‘I don’t,’ Vanimöré assured him. ‘Not in the least.’

‘I’d never seen or spoken or even imagined anyone like him,’ Sam continued softly. ‘Until now. He wasn’t flirting; it just seemed as if we were both alone and he recognised that, and...no, not flirting. People did flirt with me at work,’ he said almost defensively, as if he thought Vanimörë would not credit such a thing.

‘I am sure they did,’ Vanimöré replied gravely. ‘You are a very beautiful young man. and please take that compliment in the spirit in which it was given.’

‘Th-thank you,’ Sam stammered. ‘Well, we seemed to stand there for a long time, just talking. I couldn’t tell him anything about myself, just that I was waiting for my...father. He looked at me then, frowning, and suggested I go with him for something to eat. I wished I could, but I had no money, and well—’ He shrugged it off. ‘Maybe it was the wine, but I couldn’t help flirting with him a little.’ He took in a long breath. ‘I think Chez was watching me for some time when the man brought me another glass of wine. Some people came past, laughing, with mistletoe. They were okay, maybe a little drunk, but happy. And one of them looked at us and held it up and laughed: ‘Kiss.’ His cheeks mantled with colour. ‘I just had to kiss him; I’d never see him again, but he was so *gorgeous*. It was just a quick kiss on the lips, but it felt like an electric shock.’ He was smiling, a complicated expression of embarrassment and recalled pleasure. ‘Then *he* came, grabbed me by the arm and pulled me away.’ The smile faded; he looked desolate now, like a man watching a feast through a lit window, knowing he is consigned to the dark and cold outside. Starving. ‘He was in a very odd mood,’ Sam’s fine brows pinched. ‘Excited, but he seemed almost frightened, too. Not of me. It must have been who he met; he never told me anything about that, of course. He was almost jovial with me at first, but soon the ugliness came through. He said that maybe the man would have paid me to, he said, ream my pretty arse out.’ He did not raise his eyes, crippled by embarrassment. ‘He was sneering, laughing, said that I could earn good money doing it.’

Vanimöré had known since this morning that ‘Chez’ was going to die. There only remained the ‘how’.

‘When we got back, he went straight to the pub,’ Sam went on, and despite the fact that he would not make eye-contact, his voice was strained, fury outweighing the shame. ‘He took me with him, left me alone while he talked to some of his *mates*..’ His mouth curled as if around a bad taste; he straightened his shoulders and did look up then, defiant. ‘Maybe *I* didn’t realise until then that I was attracted to men as well as women, or just hadn’t addressed it, as there seemed no point. I would have gone with the man for something to eat — and anything else he suggested. I wanted to find...live, to really live to discover myself.’ He drank the rest of his wine far too quickly. ‘You said I owe you nothing, but if I did...I wouldn’t refuse,’ he ended in a blushing rush.

‘Oh, my dear.’ Vanimöré used the endearment before he could think. ‘Listen.’ He leaned forward. ‘Once — just once — I took advantage of someone. Never again. You do not have to pay with your body, remember that. Not me. Not anyone.’ *And now, I think, it comes, what drove him and his mother to leave.*

‘I left because — because —’ He almost knocked back the chair as he rose. His eyes closed, lips set over something unbearable. ‘Chez owed someone money. He liked to bet. And he lost more than he could pay back. He told me...if I didn’t do this, his friends would come in and rape...my mother. And he would make me watch.’ His back, when he turned away, was locked solid; under the thin tee-shirt, his muscles were taut as pulled rope, shoulders a bar. ‘And then he would have them rape me, and we’d be killed and our bodies disposed of. His friends would see to that, he said. And he would tell everyone we had just left.’

Vanimöré, who could feel so little now, almost welcomed the blinding *rage* that heated him, as if opening arteries long gone to stone-hard atrophy. It was painful, unwelcome, *necessary*. He was well aware that apathy was his enemy. He had to *care* though he feared it.

Sam’s head dropped. His voice came distorted.

‘A taxi came. It took me somewhere — outside London. The drive took an hour I think. I was numb. I couldn’t *think*. When the taxi stopped and I got out, I thought about running, but one of his

friends was with me, Jeff, he's a nasty bastard. I would have fought him, but what about my mother? I suppose you think I should have called the police, but what could I say and who would they believe? And by that time it might be too late. I thought that sooner or later he *would* kill her, you see. I must have feared it for years.'

Vanimöré thought of Vanya, how he would have done anything to protect her, and nodded, though Sam could not see. 'I do understand,' he murmured.

'There was a house...a mansion...it was obvious to me then that Chez was in over his head, whatever he was involved in. There was some kind of party going on; I could hear it, but I was taken straight upstairs, and never saw it. There were a few men, tough, dangerous, criminal. So...' He swallowed. 'I was taken into a bedroom. There was a man, a huge guy, about fifty. A lot of gold, big, fat over muscles, like...like a slab of rock wrapped in dough...' His voice faded.

'You don't have to speak of it.' Vanimöré came to his side, careful not to touch.

Sam whirled. 'No, I want to tell you! He raped me. More than once. He made me suck him, and then he held me down and raped me.' His eyes were wide, glossy, tears held back. 'I thought I was going to die and I wouldn't have cared. It was like a nightmare! I was in shock, I couldn't even fight! And he...he *really* enjoyed it.' The words shook into furious silence. Then, voice still shaking: 'He laughed after, said he wanted me again, seemed to think I would come back, that it was now a regular arrangement. He...told me to take a bath.' Sam rubbed a hand impatiently over his eyes. 'He slipped some notes into my hand, said that it was my *tip*. He would pay Jeff, but that was for me, for being a "pretty boy"'. He spat the words out like poison, reared his head high on the long column of his neck as if to say *What do you think of me now?* 'And Chez, for all his words about *gays*, he was *fucking pleased*.' He spun, walked away across the garden until a flowering cherry intruded itself into his path. He bent his head against the bark.

Vanimöré knew exactly how he felt; the rape and then after (at least with Sauron) sometimes the praise and the terrible affection. All false, all part of his game.

'Sam,' he said softly. 'It has happened to me, too.'

Sam turned. There were still no tears, but his face burned. 'To you? How could it?'

'I was not always wealthy, or with the power that comes with wealth.'

'I'm sorry. You just don't look like someone who...' His mouth twisted. 'Sorry.' A long breath. 'Anyhow, to end this: I bathed, on automatic, completely in shock, and it *hurt*. I did hide the *tip*. The next morning, I heard Chez arguing, with Mum and he punched her. I came in and he told me to be ready later because I was going out again. He'd told her that her "poncy son was going to earn a good bit of money doing what he did best." She was crying.' His lips tightened. 'I had to go to work, but I came back at lunch time, just before he went to the pub. I said I wanted to get ready early, that I'd told them I was sick.' His cheeks went pink. 'And he s-said, he said, it didn't matter; I could earn more on my hands and knees. He went out, and well...we took a few things, and left by the back gate. We got a bus to the local depot and there was a Stagecoach going to Reading. From there, we got a train to Bristol and Plymouth. Thank god I kept that *tip*, or we couldn't have afforded it.'

Vanimöré looked into the distance as Sam struggled with breath and tears.

'I will not tell you to forget it,' he said. 'One never does. But the shame is not yours. If you feel it, cast it away. You can overcome it. You have the strength.'

'I intend to,' Sam shot at him. 'I'm just worried that they'll find us. I'm surprised Chez and his mates haven't come already. Chez has no car but Jeff does and Alan Watts. That was why Mum would never ask Madge for help. She didn't want them mixed up with Chez and the others.'

Vanimöré had been thinking along the same lines. 'Yes, we'll have to deal with that. What is Chez's full name and address? And this Jeff's too. In fact any of them, if you know their names and where they live, tell me.'

Sam recited them, staring at Vanimöré. 'How are you going to deal with it?'

'Oh, quite easily, I assure you. Don't worry about it. Now, sit down, and finish your drink.' He indicated a recliner, poured more champagne. 'A couple of things: did the man who raped you use protection?'

Sam nodded stiffly. 'He said I looked like a virgin...' His mouth trembled, 'B-but he couldn't be too careful.'

'How very considerate of him. Sit down. I must make a couple of calls.'

Sam leaned back in the recliner with a pale smile. 'Are you going to...hire a hit man?' He asked it as only half a joke. Vanimöré answered in the same vein.

'Something like that. This house outside of London: any idea where it was, any names?'

Sam sucked in a breath, frowning. 'I'm trying to think. No, there were no names, not that I heard. But...' Van waited. 'I'd know him again, oh god, wouldn't I! We drove south for about an hour and we'd just passed through a village called... Arden Hill. I saw the taxi's headlights illuminate the sign. The mansion about five minutes from there.'

'That's very helpful. Now just relax a moment.' Locked in his own battle with righteous rage, Vanimöré strode into the house and his study. Opening a desk drawer, he took out a burner phone. 'Howard, it's Lucien.'

'Well, well, well, Mr. Steele. I'm so honoured you should deign to get in touch.' Then. 'It's been over a year.'

'My dear Howard, you know perfectly well I am at Summerland. If you don't then your department needs a major shaking up.'

'Don't start with me!'

'All right, Howard, I have something that needs looking into. Some of it I will deal with myself. A certain Charles Bennett of this address....Involved in some minor branch of the Far Right, the Lions of England.'

He heard Howard sigh. 'Is this going to be messy?'

'I doubt the so-called Lions have any clout; they're bottom feeders, but the people this Chez, as he's known, has become involved in may be rather messy, yes.'

Howard was silent, then breathed out.

'Okay. Actually this will be a pleasure...' Sounds of fingers tapping on a keyboard. 'Arden Hill. Yes, there's a country house near it, Rochford Manor. They weren't being careful, were they?'

'I imagine the people using the house are careful, but not Chez Bennett; I doubt he has enough brains, and as Sam said, he was way out of his depth.' Vanimöre took the phone over to the window, half-wondering if Sam had bolted, but he was laid back on the recliner, staring at nothing. The empty glass had been placed in the table. 'Whatever he's told them, the man Sam was sent to believe this was going to be a permanent arrangement and probably thought there was nothing to worry about.'

'Hmm, he must have. Human trafficking...well, those poor bastards have no-one and nothing. They slip under the radar. But someone's *son*. A British citizen? It's filthy, Lucien.'

'It is,' Vanimöre agreed. 'And I will deal with Chez and his cronies.'

'I was afraid you were going to say that.'

'He may be on his way here, but if not, I want him and his friends tailed and his movements reported.'

'I'll get right on that. I can send back-up,' he added hopefully.

'No need, Howard. I have back-up.'

There was a groan. 'Oh my god.'

Vanimöre smiled coldly. 'Well, not *your* god, Lucien.'

'Fuck you, Steele. I'll get back to you. Our next lunch is on you, by the way.'

'Naturally.' Vanimöre put the phone down, dismantled it and bagged it to dispose of later. He slipped another burner in the back pocket of his jeans.

Sam was asleep in the shade, head tilted slightly to one side, the bruise showing on his jaw. Perhaps, so long ago, Vanimöre himself had looked thus, in Angband, when Melkor had finished with him.

It seems I am always drawn to those who are damaged. He wanted to heal them, recreate them, and the Vanimöre of the Outside could do that and he refused to. There is no life without *life*.

We are tempered by the storms.

Sam slept for an hour, as the sun slowly moved westward and the afternoon light lay in a golden kiss on the gardens. The calm sea breathed and the trees echoed its sigh. Sam blinked, drowsy, peaceful, then sighed, and opened his eyes fully. They were filled with light.

Vanimöre had brought some papers to the table and was looking through them. He looked up, smiled.

'You obviously needed to sleep. Would you like some tea, coffee?'

'Sorry, that was rude of me.' Sam stretched, loose-limbed, and straightened the recliner.

‘You needed to sleep. You and your mother will need to catch up on a lot of sleep. Constant stress is exhausting.’

‘It must have been the champagne,’ Sam apologised. ‘And I’m sorry I shot my mouth off.’

‘As I told you, I went through the same thing.’ Vanimöré put his papers together. ‘Come. I have drafted up a brief work contract. You can start tomorrow if you want.’

Inside, he made coffee for them, and took Sam into the study. ‘I will also give you the code for the main gates. I change it periodically. Do you drive, by the way?’

The fair head was lowered over the contract. ‘No...it would have given me too much freedom. And there was no money for the lessons.’

‘That’s something else I will see to, then. Jimmy often brought things in in his van, equipment, soil, seed, and so forth. You will need to do the same when you’ve passed your test.’ he went to the safe, opened it and brought out his cash box. ‘You’ll need work boots, coveralls, clothes, and I don’t suppose you managed to bring much with you.’ The notes were in one thousand pound bundles. He placed two on the table. ‘Perhaps Madge would drive you and your mother into Plymouth to buy some clothes tomorrow. If not, I’ll be happy to.’

Sam leaned back from the money as if it might explode in his face. ‘I can’t take that!’ His voice came strangled.

‘Once you have been in the village a while,’ Vanimöré said. ‘You will come to know that I look after my employers and their families.’ He kept his expression neutral, even a little bored. ‘And I have a great dislike of *bullies*.’

Pen in hand, Sam looked up. ‘It feels like I’ve walked out of a nightmare into a fairy tale,’ he said with a shaky laugh.

‘I don’t believe in fairy tales,’ Vanimöré said sombrely. ‘Only the dark ones. And what is the point of having wealth and not using it to help others?’

Sam bent to print and sign his name.

‘I thought, for years my name was Samuel,’ he said. ‘It’s not, it’s *Samael*, apparently.’ With an embarrassed little grin. ‘An archangel, I believe. I think she — Mum — just wanted something different. She said I looked like an angel when I was born.’ He laughed and cast up his eyes. ‘But *he* would never have gone for another angelic name, Gabriel for instance, so she chose Samael— he always thought it was Samuel, too.’

Vanimöré raised his brows. ‘Your mother called you that? Rather an interesting character, Samael.’

The smile crooked into wryness. ‘We have nothing in common then, Mr. Steele. I’ve done nothing, nothing at all.’

‘Well, then, let’s see if we can help you spread your wings, Samael.’ Vanimöré smiled.

OooOooO

~ Death on a Quiet Day ~

~ Death on a Quiet Day ~

'I've never been in a car like this,' Sam said as he settled into the passenger seat of the Bentley with something like awe in his face. 'I've never been in cars much, buses mostly. But I usually walk.'

Vanimöré started the engine and the car eased down the drive. He smiled. 'Oh, Sören's a good ride,' he said.

'You call the car Sören?' Sam sounded puzzled, a little amused. 'Don't people call cars 'she'?''

'Sometimes. But I know a Sören, and this Bentley is quite definitely him.' He operated the code for the gates, which swung back. A moment later they were on the road, heading west.

After a conversation the previous evening with Madge, it was decided that she would take Julie shopping in Plymouth, including a hair cut, and lunch, making it a 'girly day out', while Vanimöré would take Sam. Julie apparently trusted her sister and brother-in-law's assessment of Lucien Steele as a person who would look after her son.

'I think she *deserves* to be spoiled,' Sam said. 'She's never had anything, married to him. She couldn't believe anyone would just give her a thousand pounds to buy something.' He glanced at Vanimöré doubtfully.

The sun patched the road which passed under trees swelling into full leaf. The air that blew in was fragrant, sea-salt and green, and the foaming clouds of hedge-parsley. It was Monday, and apart from a few cars and farm vehicles, the small roads were quiet.

'More's the pity,' Vanimöré said. He was thinking. It was an hour's drive to Plymouth, and at some point he would have to change the contact lenses that hid his violet eyes. After about four hours, the colour began to show through. But he would suggest lunch, probably at a quiet pub, and change them there if need be.

'She said it reminded her of something she read in a book,' Sam said. '*If you get run over, be sure and pick a Rolls Royce.*'

Vanimöré smiled. 'Won't a Bentley do as well? Do you read, yourself?'

'I should think so.' Sam laughed. 'Yes, I love reading. He used to take me to the library. He didn't care much what books I got, as he read nothing except the Sun newspaper.'

'Why does that not surprise me? Did you sleep any better last night?'

'Not really. I'd sleep better if I knew he was dead.' Sam's voice turned ice-cold. 'I kept waking, listening for cars pulling into the park.'

Soon. Vanimöré thought. Chez Bennett's life was ticking down into its last hours.

Sam tipped his head back against the head-rest. After a moment he sighed, straightened. He was glancing at Vanimöré's arms, shirt-sleeves rolled back.

'Those are amazing tattoos. I always thought I hated them. Chez has them, crossed daggers, like the SAS, a woman with...you know, huge breasts. Ugly things, amateurish. Jeff has those black tears and spiderwebs. But those are beautiful.'

'Thank you.'

Howard had contacted him yesterday evening with the information required. The soon-to-be-disposed of Chez was indeed on his way from London and, not having a car himself, had roped in his 'Lions' friends. All eight of them. But there was time yet.

'They're not big league enough to have guns,' Howard continued. 'Knives, hammers, baseball bats, knuckle-dusters, that kind of thing.' There was a fastidious distaste in his tone.

'I know the kind of thing, Howard,' Vanimöré assured him. 'Don't worry. And thank you. I'll contact you after everything is concluded.'

'Jesus, Lucien, *don't* ask me to get rid of eight bodies,' Howard exploded.

'Oh, I seriously doubt there will be eight,' Vanimöré reassured him. 'But I am sure the survivors can be put away for some time.'

Howard snorted. 'You can bet on that.'

Vanimöré had not slept last night. He did not like leaving things to chance, or to Howard or any branch of the intelligence service. It was not in his nature, and so he had waited outside the gates of Southview Caravan Park as the last lights in the house and in the few occupied caravans went out and the spring night crowded with stars.

Plymouth was sunny and busy. They shopped. Vanimöré could see the times Sam forgot himself before diffidence and embarrassment (and the memory of rape) clamped back down, stilling his voice, freezing his face. He would have chosen the cheapest clothes, the no-name jeans and shirts, but Vanimöré said 'Cheap clothes don't last.' And swept him into a store that didn't do cheap, thank you *so* much. He rather admired the fact that Sam continued to object, albeit in an under-voice.

'They must think I'm your rent boy,' he said in a furious whisper when Vanimöré had paid. 'And you didn't even use the cash.'

'If you were my rent boy, Sam, I would take you up to London and kit you out there,' Vanimöré replied dryly.

Sam blushed fierily. 'Sorry,' he stammered. 'But you must see how it looks.'

'I shouldn't think it looks like anything,' Vanimöré said in a bored voice. 'And why would you care what people think?'

'Easy for you to say,' Sam muttered.

'Possibly, anyway, that's done, save for the work boots. Shall we have a coffee and then get them? Oh, and a phone and iPad, I think. You'll need both for your job, so Summerland picks up the bill. We can stop for lunch on the way back.'

With the shopping in the Bentley's boot, they drove out of Plymouth. A few miles on, Vanimöré drew into the car park of an old pub-restaurant that was known to serve excellent food. A few businessmen were at the tables, a few locals in the bar, but it was in no way busy. Vanimöré had eaten there a few times with Howard and the manager knew him. He stared, hurried forward, smiling.

'How nice to see you again, Mr. Steele,' he murmured, and escorted him to a semi-private table in an alcove. There was only one person opposite, an exceptionally smart single man in a suit, perusing a menu. He glanced up briefly as Vanimöré and Sam sat down.

Sam had been almost silent since Plymouth. He bent his fair, curly head over the handwritten menu, and Vanimöré observing him, said, 'Come out of the sulks, Sam, for gods' sakes. What would you like to eat?'

Sam stiffened. 'I'm not sulking,' he denied. 'I just... I'm sorry, but...'

'I know you do not trust me, and I cannot make you,' Vanimöré murmured. 'But I am nothing like the man Chez sold you to. I am not buying you. I am employing you and I will say one more time: I have a veritable loathing of bullies, and always look after my employers.' He was not really thinking of the few people he employed in Summerland, but of the thousands of young warriors he had commanded in the past. In a way Sam reminded him of them.

'I wasn't thinking that,' Sam lied, looking away. 'I just...I don't *understand*. he ended honestly.

'Well, don't overthink it,' Vanimöré advised. 'Accept it as it seems; that is exactly what it is.'

They drank fresh orange juice over ice while waiting for lunch. The man opposite occasionally glanced at them as if he were trying to work out if they were a couple, but there was nothing mocking or hateful in his expression and when Vanimöré stared at him with raised brows he smiled wryly as if he had been caught out, and looked away as his lunch was placed on the table.

'I shouldn't have said that,' Sam apologised. 'About people thinking I was your...well. You wouldn't need to *buy* anyone, and that man...in the house, he was a lot older than you. And you're not...er...'

Vanimöré concealed his amusement. 'No, I am not gay, Sam. Like you, I enjoy both, at times. Although I refuse to categorise sexuality.' He watched the man opposite for a moment and said, loud enough for him to hear, timing his moment: '*He* is rather beautiful, don't you think?'

The man choked on a mouthful, seized a napkin and held it to his face, still coughing. Vanimöré smiled coolly.

'Poor guy.' Sam laughed slightly. 'Should we pat him on the back?'

Vanimöré rose, helpfully swatted the man on his suited back a few times, then returned to the table thoughtfully. 'I think he'll live.' The man took a sip of water. 'But don't you think he's rather lovely?'

He was, on close inspection an extremely handsome young man, with thick dark hair and eyes of a strangely brilliant blue.

Sam didn't answer. He was flushed.

'The first thing to do is accept yourself, own what you are,' Vanimöré told him quietly. 'There's no shame in it, despite what people like Chez would tell you. It's quite natural.'

Sam's head bent. 'I believe you, but I never had the freedom to explore it, or to address it. What was the point? And now...'

'One's first sexual experience should always be consensual,' Vanimöré said. 'It might be clumsy, messy, laughable, a mistake, even disappointing, but never forced. But I vowed to myself it was not going to affect me; that I would have pleasure, and give it. I would not let it define me, Sam, and neither must you.'

A nod. 'I'm trying.'

'You have time, now.'

'Not until Chez is dealt with,' Sam said tightly.

'He will be,' Vanimöré responded. 'But don't speak of it here.'

The waiter came then, with their lunch and they ate in silence. The man opposite seemed to have regained his breath and equilibrium enough to ignore them, although the colour on his handsome face was rather heightened.

It was after one o'clock when they left, the dark-haired man not long behind them, checking his wristwatch as he approached his car, a graphite grey Lotus Elise.

'Nice car,' Vanimöré drawled as the Bentley's doors unlocked. The man looked around, Vanimöré clicked his tongue on the roof of his mouth and winked.

The man showed excellent teeth in a cool smile.

'Nice car,' he echoed, nodding at the Bentley.

'Were you *trolling* him?' Sam asked, half laughing as he buckled his seat-belt.

'Just a little. Sometimes it's irresistible.' They pulled out, leaving the pub behind. 'He seemed very interested in you; I wasn't sure if you minded or not?'

'Me? I should think it was *you*, he was interested in!'

'Not if has any sense. I'm not at all *easy* to pick up.' He glanced at Sam, who was frowning at him. 'What is it?'

Sam threw up his hands, slapped them down on his knees with an explosive breath. 'That's crazy. Don't you even...Madge said you always reminded her of Lucifer before the fall.' After a blushing pause. 'The bright and morning star, she called you.'

‘How you have fallen from heaven, O STAR of the morning, son of the dawn!’ Vanimöré quoted. ‘It’s from the Bible.’

‘Is it? I never..never read it. But she’s right.’

Vanimöré’s mouth twitched. ‘I’m not sure if that’s a compliment or not,’ he teased. ‘Being likened to Lucifer, even *before* the fall.’

‘Oh, you know what she means. You don’t...look quite *human*. I said you reminded me the man at Covent Garden. He didn’t, either.’

‘This is just getting worse,’ Vanimöré laughed. ‘But neither do you; you have the look of a marble angel.’ At the ensuing, heavy silence he said, ‘That definitely *was* a compliment, by the way. You might say that beauty is my aesthetic. It does not mean that I am going to proposition you.’

‘No, not that. It’s just that man, the one...that’s what *he* said when I was taken to his room. He just looked at me and grinned and said, ‘Fuck me, they’ve brought me virgin with an angel’s face.’

Vanimöré’s hands tightened on the steering wheel. After Chez and his cronies were dealt with, there would be time to track down that one. Howard had found out quickly enough who he was: Ronnie Trent, who had modelled himself on the old-style London Gangsters, and had a finger in any pie one cared to mention: drugs, and human trafficking among them. The ‘house party’ had been supplied by girls bought in for the night, although not by him. Ronnie Trent would have been as shocked as anyone to realise they weren’t girls booked online and willing, but sex-slaves.

So far he had avoided jail by (Howard said) keeping his trail very clean and disposing of anyone who might give evidence against him. Publicly, he owned a chain of bookmakers, and Vanimöré had not been surprised to learn that the one Sam had worked at had been bought by him a few months ago.

He glanced at times in the rear view mirror and when he saw when he was expecting, slid a phone out of the side pocket. It was strictly illegal to use a phone while driving, but Vanimöré had certain advantages over Mortals in that he was no danger on the road.

‘Okay, Howard, you can tell your blue-eyed boy to stand down.’

Sam turned his head to stare, and then craned his neck to look through the rear window.

‘I have no idea what you’re talking about, Mr. Steele.’

‘Come on, Howard, he’s hardly undercover. A *Lotus*? What incentive do you offer? Tail Lucien Steele and drive expensive cars? Paid for by me, I don’t doubt. When I made him choke in the Red Lion I patted his back and felt his gun harness.’

Howard swore. ‘All right. *Damn*. But he was very keen. And it’s his car, actually. Rich parents. But he’s very good.’

‘Right. Pull him back in and get him to tone it down. He paid with a damn *Coutts* Bank debit card —’

‘So do you,’ Howard protested weakly.

‘— He’s wearing Henry Poole. I ought to know. Perfect hair, perfect teeth, bright blue contact

lenses?’ He was reminded that he had not changed his own. ‘Is he *trying* to draw attention to himself?’

‘No, those are his real eyes.’ Howard sighed. ‘Look, I know he’s a bit over the top, but despite the fact that he’s from money, he seriously is good. The best I’ve seen. And brains too. I thought you might need some back-up.’

‘No, you just wanted eyes on the scene.’

‘He was going to Summerland to speak to you first.’

‘And what is this paragon’s name, just so I can call it him while I tear several strips off him?’

‘Leon St.Cloud.’

The St. Cloud’s...oh yes, they had made fortunes as ‘Nabobs’ in India throughout the 18th Century. Since then, they had only added to their fortune and married into the peerage, so that the current Viscount was related to half the aristocratic families in England. The Viscount himself was a vague, harmless man who lived for his horses, following racing around the world. Vanimöré had no occasion to be interested in him or his children, though Leon must be one of them.

Howard was saying hurriedly: ‘—went to Eton and then joined the RAF rather than the Navy, for some reason. Wanted to be a fighter pilot although there was something wrong with his eyes, so he became an Intelligence Analyst.’

‘Very well, Howard, I can tell he’s your golden boy.’

‘Fuck. You. He was seconded to the SAS in Afghanistan for a year. I tell you he’s *good*. His connections have nothing to do with it.’

‘Of course not Howard, but either way, he stands down. He needs a few lessons before you let him loose.’

They eased over a roundabout as Vanimöré ended the call, and it was then that Sam stiffened in his seat. ‘My god—! Jeff, and Chaz.’

‘Yes,’ Vanimöré said quietly. ‘In that Ford Escort?’

‘Yes, but how do you—’

‘I told you they would be dealt with. I was given the license plates of their cars last night.’ Vanimöré glanced in the rear view mirror.

‘He saw me,’ Sam said sickly. Then, slewing round in his seat. ‘He’ll go to Southview—’

‘Not if I can help it,’ Vanimöré said, as he took the east-bound road. ‘And your mother’s not there.’

‘No, but John is, and a few others.’

‘They’ll not reach Southview, don’t worry.’

The Escort was following. Vanimöré could see the driver and passenger clearly as they drew

closer. The driver was a goat-faced man with prominent teeth and lank dark hair, while Chez was rough, flat-faced as a bull. That face now was red with rage, his big, stained teeth bared.

‘He approached the rapist for help,’ Vanimöré said. ‘He’s some kind of gang leader called Ronnie Trent. But your father’s very small fry to people like Ronnie, and told him to deal with it on his own.’

‘How do you *know*?’ Sam demanded.

‘I have acquaintances in quite a few of the intelligence services. I simply got on the phone to one of them.’ He smiled, allowed the Escort to tailgait him for a moment, like a little terrier yapping at a panther. He patted the steering wheel.

‘Come on, then beauty, let’s see what you have under that hood.’

The Bentley pulled away with a leonine purr, left the escort standing. ‘

‘God,’ Sam gulped, the acceleration pushing him into his seat.

The road swooped and curved like a grey snake; the Bentley hugged it like a lover, its great engine growling. Behind, them the Escort, closely followed by a Skoda carrying the rest of the so-called Lion’s, laid down exhaust as they pushed the cars to their maximum speed. Vanimöré slowed again, to sixty...forty...thirty, until the Escort was within twenty feet, and closing. He extended his arm and raised the middle finger, then put his foot down gently. Wind streamed through the windows.

‘Oh, my god. I don’t believe you!’ It was almost a laugh. ‘What are you going to do?’

Vanimöré flashed a smile. ‘Trust me.’

Vanimöré taunted the two cars, drawing them off the main road onto the smaller country lanes that linked the coastal villages together. The Bentley ran between banks of frothing hedge-parsley, under the green clouds of trees and Vanimöré, half-smiling, slowed again until the fuming Escort behind was on his rear bumper, and the raging men in the front were almost close enough to hear. Then he took off. He saw Smael’s head turn, white and set, to stare at him.

The road ran straight for a few miles and they met no traffic coming but, behind the Escort and the Skoda, and further back, just cruising, were two other vehicles. One of them was the Lotus. Vanimöré raised his brows, then ignored them, the Bentley roaring down the straight like a jet fighter. There was a sharp bend coming up and he had no intention of slowing down. His senses told him that there was no oncoming traffic but Sam said, ‘Jesus,’ like a last prayer, and his hands gripped the leather of the seats. His eyes slammed shut.

The Bentley screamed around the tight corner, wheels gripping, bringing the stink of burnt rubber into the car.

‘Oh, you beauty,’ Vanimöré murmured, smiling. Ahead the road was narrow, slicing between tall hedges for three or more miles. With a throaty roar, the Bentley shot down the line of the tarmac and the greenery blurred *light-dark* from sun to shade. Then he slowed, backed into a field gate and reversed, facing the way they had come.

‘What are you doing?’ Sam asked in a tight voice.

‘Don’t worry.’ Vanimöré said. ‘Close your window, now. And don’t get out of the car unless I tell

you to.'

Sam shot him a startled look, but the window slid upward.

Whatever they were, bullies, racists, petty-criminals, their pursuers were not quite suicidal and came around the bend cautiously to see, waiting ahead of them, and blocking the road, the Bentley. Vanimöré could *feel* the men's bewilderment and, under the violence, their fear. But they knew they had been played with and did not like it. Their testosterone was high, they wanted to hurt someone. Yet they crept forward — probably thinking to get out of their cars and approach. They would be readying their knives, their bats, and hammers. *Amateurs*, he thought, contemptuously.

The Bentley waited like a predator, tinted windows dark and blank. A pity Sam had his passenger window down as they crossed the roundabout; he would not have been seen otherwise and Vanimöré would have preferred to deal with these *orcs* without Sam witnessing but, as someone once said, sometimes people need to see their monsters slain.

The Escort stopped. Vanimöré moved the Bentley forward again, quietly, inexorably, and Escort and Skoda stopped, then backed, but the cars behind it had also stopped. There was no room to turn or pass. A horn blare broke the quiet of the lane. The man in the further car got out, an unfolding of long limbs, and the sun glanced white from his head.

'Come to play?' Vanimöré whispered. The Bentley's engine, idling, gave a hunting-lion *cough-cough*, which rose suddenly to a rising snarl of threat — and leapt forward as if going in for the kill.

'One of the reasons I like these cars,' he said mildly. 'Is they are built like tanks. So if I misjudge and we collide...we're not the ones who will regret it.' He smiled sidelong at Sam.

Vanimöré could see the men's faces, mouths open as he accelerated, felt their burst of terror, saw them, almost at the last moment, tumble from the two cars as he hit the brakes, swerved in a skidding scream. The right wing of the Bentley came to a stop scarcely an inch from the Escort's.

He leapt from the car, grabbed the stumbling Chaz and threw him into the green ditch, then jumped on the bonnet and, whirling, kicked the driver in the head. The man went down like a stone. He back-flipped onto the car roof. The two men from the back of the escort gaped. Then their faces set. One of them had a long knife in one hand, the other a short axe. Beyond them, the men in the Skoda were shouting, flailing, posturing, egging them on.

With a mental shrug, Vanimöré dropped his glamour — and their faces changed. His swords slid naturally into his hands.

The men backed away, slack-jawed, eyes rolling white. Vanimöré somersaulted down, landing before one of them, whose head lifted from his neck, surprised, as the body sagged down, neck-stump spuming blood. The other yelled, a sound high as a girl's and tried to run, tripping over. The white-haired man, coming forward in silent feet, glanced at Vanimöré and, casually drove a knife down into the back of his bent head. The hilt stuck there. The man waited until the body collapsed and drew it forth.

The four men from the Skoda fled; only one of them tried to fight, charging with machete raised, lips skinned back from his teeth. Light burst in red-gold under the trees. There was the smell of burning as Coldagnir alighted, burning, wings snapping then vanishing. The man shrieked, tipping back on his toes. There came the deeper cooking-meat stink of scorching flesh and the man's face

melted, eyes running into viscid fluid.

‘Let them go,’ Vanimöré said and smiled at Edenel and Coldagnir. ‘I did *almost* promise Howard not to land him with eight bodies.’

‘Thou canst not let them go, Vanimörë, not with their weapons; they could harm others.’ Edenel turned to watch the fleeing men, running (or trying to) silently, with complete dedication.

‘Hmm, no, perhaps thou art right. Wouldst thou like to deal with it, Edenel?’

‘It would be my pleasure.’ Like the hunter and killer he was, Edenel turned, stalked after them, not hurrying, his knives in his hands. One of them lifted, flew. A running man stiffened, arms flying out, then went down on his face.

The door of the Lotus opened. Its driver climbed out and calmly took a marksman’s stance. Gunshots sounded, crisp, accurate; the double-tap of torso, then head. *Crack-crack, crack-crack* Cool, utterly professional as if on a shooting range. His targets collapsed like dolls.

There was a heartbeat of silence, then Vanimöré spun at the sound of a struggle behind him. Sam was fighting with Chez, who had crawled out of the ditch. He watched as the young man attacked, surprised. From somewhere, or perhaps from sheer rage and desperation, Sam had learned how to fight, but Chez was a tough man and fought back. He landed punches that Sam seemed to shake off, grey eyes burning. He spun and kicked the man in the head, then whirled back to bring his toe up into the unprotected groin.

Chez went down, but Sam followed him, kneeling on his chest, wrapping his hands around the meaty throat. Vanimörë watched. Edenel and Coldagnir came to his side and they waited as Sam choked the life from the man who had controlled and abused both his mother and himself. Chez’s hands clawed at his, opening the skin, and still Sam increased the pressure, unmoving, his face set like stone. The dying man thrashed and bucked desperately the stiffened, went still. His bowels opened. The staring eyes were red with burst blood vessels. Blood tickled from his slack mouth.

Vanimöré walked toward Sam as he straightened, his face and eyes blank.

‘Well done, my dear.’ He laid a hand on the hot, taut shoulder. Sam’s stressed breathing sounded like tearing cotton in the sudden quiet. He staggered looked up, and his eyes flicked across to the other dead bodies. There was, for a moment, nothing in them, and then he retched, bent over and vomited. Vanimöré rubbed his back, looked at Coldagnir and Edenel and then the young man. Leon St. Cloud, who shrugged disarmingly and smiled.

Sam wiped his mouth, half-fell against Vanimöré, who supported him.

‘They’re all dead,’ he croaked. ‘All of them...all dead.’ He sounded dazed.

‘Yes, Samael, all dead.’

‘Good.’ He pushed himself upright. ‘I don’t care. I *don’t care*.’ His eyes blazed in a face white as lint. ‘I’m glad! I’m glad I killed him.’ But he was shaking.

‘Oh, nor do we, and of course you are.’ Vanimöré smiled at him. ‘You see, some people are better dead. They serve absolutely no purpose.’ *Too much orc blood.*

‘If you will just wait a moment—’ Leon St. Cloud said in his public-school accent, and lifted a finger. The throb of helicopter blades intruded on the quiet, filling the air, shaking the trees like an

incoming storm. They came down in the field and men jumped out, black-clothed soldiers who ducked under the slowing blades, ran up to the corpses, zipped them quickly into body bags. Others jogged up the lane to string plastic Police tape from side to side. Howard emerged from the helicopter, his face set into lines of resignation.

‘You told me there wouldn’t be eight bodies,’ he barked.

Vanimöre grinned at him. ‘That was a slight miscalculation,’ he owned.

‘No shit? Now they’ll have to close the damn road until we get the cars out of the way. The police are on their way and I had to do a lot of fast talking about terrorism and hate groups and undercover operations. I hate you, Steele.’

Vanimöre laughed, blew him a kiss.

‘And...and you were fucking speeding!’ He marched over to Leon St. Cloud muttering.

‘I told you to stand down blue eyes over there,’ Vanimöre called. Howard jerked around and glared at him. Leon St. Cloud smiled, demure as a Madonna. Vanimöre’s eyes narrowed on him. He and Sam had been the only ones to witness them as they were, himself, Edenel and Coldagnir, their glamour dropped. Sam was no doubt in shock, but Leon St. Cloud was cool as spring water. Interesting.

‘Summerland,’ he said. ‘Half an hour.’ The helicopters started to lift, leaving the road clear save for the cars.

‘Come.’ Vanimöre lead Sam over to the Bentley. ‘There are just a few things to clear up.’

OooOooO

~ Movement in the Shadows ~

~ Movement in the Shadows

~ ‘So where are they?’ Howard asked as he sat down.

‘Who?’ Vanimöré asked without looking up, pouring coffee from a silver pot.

‘So-called Aelios and so-called Eden Dale,’ Howard sing-songed through his teeth.

‘With Samael. He did just kill a man, Howard. It can be traumatic, the first time.’

‘Was it difficult for you, Mr. Steele?’ Leon St. Cloud asked coolly.

Vanimöré showed his teeth. ‘No.’ Neither was it a Man, but an orc although men like the ones recently dealt with were little more than orcs. ‘Well, Mr. St. Cloud, did you not get a call from Howard to stand down?’

‘There was no signal,’ Leon replied lying with a straight face and wide-open eyes. No tells at all.

Vanimöré handed Howard his coffee. ‘You said he was good,’ he murmured. ‘But too independent. And far too flashy.’ Leon flushed. Howard snorted.

‘Howard said you liked people to think for themselves,’ Leon said, bristling.

‘*Touché*, and so I do. But *I* am not technically employing you. Leon St. Cloud. That is the province of the British government. So, Howard, what made you employ him?’

‘He came up on our radar,’ Howard shrugged. ‘It’s not bloody easy, Steele, to employ the right sort of people, as you should know. Apart from anything else, our fieldwork operatives need to be fairly young, fit, intelligent and unmarried, at least bilingual, more if possible. And ah...open minded. That’s usually the most difficult attribute to find. I interviewed him, three different interviews and the usual battery of tests and he passed them with flying colours. *You*,’ he added pointedly. ‘Were incommunicado.’ He gulped his coffee. ‘And we still have to talk about that—’

‘No, Howard, we don’t.’ Vanimöré regarded Leon St. Cloud who looked back at him with a wry half-smile and said, ‘Not easy for us pretty boys to prove ourselves, is it?’

‘Is that what it is for you?’ Vanimöré wondered. ‘Howard, I’m sure you have something to do for a little while?’

Howard finished his coffee and got to his feet. Laptop in hand, he said sourly: ‘Oh, I don’t know. It’s not like you haven’t given me *eight bodies* and two cars to explain away. I hope your damn Bentley needs new wheels by the way.’

'I may use him hard, sometimes, but I always see that Sören gets the best aftercare,' Vanimöré smiled.

'Christ, Steele, anyone would think that damn car was your lover. I'll be in the library.'

'Thank you, Howard,' Vanimöré said, still smiling sweetly. 'Oh, I will need all the information on the families of the dead. I don't want them to suffer any financial hardship — unless they're cast in the same mould, in which case they can rot. I will deal with Julie Bennet and Samael, of course.'

'I'll get my people right on it,' Howard grumbled.

'And have some sympathetic police officers attend Julie,' Vanimöré added. 'There will be a reaction, no matter what her feelings.'

'Naturally.'

'And — I am not sure if she needs to know that her son killed him. I must speak to Samael about that.'

'Yes, *sir*, anything else?'

'Help yourself to the drinks tray in the library,' Vanimöré suggested kindly.

'*Too* kind.' Howard pulled the door shut behind him with something of a slam.

Leon's very blue eyes danced. 'He loves his job really,' he said. 'Keeps him on his toes. He'd die of boredom if he retired.'

'And do you love *your* job?' Vanimöré asked.

'It's suddenly become rather more exciting,' Leon said. 'I joined last September and spent the first couple of months in the office. There was a lot to learn, to assimilate.' He smoothed a slim hand over his trouser leg. Well-manicured hands, but not at all soft. 'I was beginning to think you didn't really exist, except that of course, Apollyon Enterprises is very real. But there's no photographs of you online, even Howard doesn't have them. The ones people manage to take, disappear very quickly.'

'Of course,' Vanimöré said.

'But Howard described you well enough. Still, it was a shock.' He picked at an invisible piece of lint, and Vanimöré realised that, despite his apparent *sangfroid*, he was nervous.

'And thou didst see me unglamoured.'

Leon started. For the first time, his eyes showed wariness.

'Howard warned me that most of the people who have seen that are dead.'

'Well not many people *have* seen me like that,' he smiled. 'And in general they do die, because I drop the glamour just *before* I kill them.'

'I...see.'

'And you saw Coldagnir and Edenel, too,' Vanimöré mused. 'But you kept it together rather well,

nonetheless.'

'Yes. Thank you.' He paused, frowned. 'You see...my great-uncle Roland swore to the end of his long life that he'd seen what he called a dark angel. And the description fitted *you*. It wasn't until Howard described you that I remembered Roland's story.'

Vanimöré crossed one leg over the other. 'And what was his story?'

'Uncle Roland was a dreamer,' with a reminiscent smile. 'The eccentric uncle who travelled all over the world. He read that book, 'Chariots of the Gods', in the 70's, and after that spent his life travelling to ancient sites, going off for months, hiring local guides and camping at these places, like a more modern-day Percy Fawcett He was gathering notes to write his own book, but he used weed, mushrooms, you know. Father said he was sure Roland had seen things, but it was the result of hallucinogens.'

'In the 60's he went to Greece. It was a bit before the tourism boom, and he camped at Delphi. There weren't any security guards there at night, but no doubt he would have bribed them if there were. Maybe he thought he'd hear the ancient oracle speak, or something.'

'Ah, yes,' Vanimöré said and Leon knitted his brows.

'He went to sleep and woke up some time in the night. He had a feel for 'place', for atmosphere, you know?' Vanimöré nodded. 'And he said Delphi, under the moonlight, was sacred. That was his word.'

Vanimöré poured a tot of brandy into Leon's coffee.

'Thank you. Well, he was camping in the theatre, rather than the Temple, to make the most of the view at dawn, and you probably know that the acoustics there are incredible?'

'I know.'

'He thought he was dreaming because someone was speaking; it made the hairs on the back of his neck stand up. But the one thing I will say about Uncle Roland: he was never a coward. He'd find guides to take into war zones. He listened and couldn't understand the language, and then, he said, it was as if he suddenly did understand, as if the speaker had suddenly switched to English.'

Vanimöré recited: *I count the grains of sand on the beach and measure the sea; I understand the speech of the dumb and hear the voiceless.*"

Leon sat perfectly still. He nodded, moistened his lips.

'And then, this: If all time is eternally present

All time is unredeemable.

What might have been is an abstraction

Remaining a perpetual possibility

Only in a world of speculation.

What might have been and what has been

Point to one end, which is always present.

'He was a big fan of Elliot, and the words, he suddenly felt, made sense. And the theatre seemed to light up. He'd crawled behind a cypress tree and saw someone standing there, light all around him, illuminating him, and great triple wings shimmering.' A short laugh. 'Roland wasn't religious, but for a minute, he said, superstitious dread gripped him, and he thought an angel had come to demand an accounting of him.' Vanimöré smiled. 'He said, if this visitation was an angel, the artists' impression were not only wrong, but criminally, laughably wrong, and then, inevitably, he

began to think of Fallen angels, because what he saw fitted that more easily. The...being was glorious, too beautiful to be real, but terrible, too, this was something that could kill with one glance. Like a force of nature, a falling asteroid. But it didn't notice him, just walked down from the theatre toward the Temple. He realised, when he could move, that he'd lost control of his bladder.'

'Delphi is a portal,' Vanimöré murmured. 'Well? Before I left, I know someone in the department had come up with the theory. Howard kept binging up the subject. Not very subtly.' He steepled his fingers under his chin. 'It sounds as if your great-uncle was sensitive. Some people are. They can glimpse what is really there, rather than what is projected.'

'The theory of the portals is classified.' Then Leon laughed at himself, rolled his very-blue eyes. 'Alright, that was a stupid thing to say. So the theory is correct? You...you really look like that?'

Vanimöré shrugged. 'Summerland has a portal too, an old tumulus in the grounds. My old gardener insisted it was an ice-house, from the days when people didn't have freezers, but it's a tumulus and a portal.' He rose. 'More brandy? Though I encourage you not to drive, after. The wings are simply whimsy, rather beautiful, but nor necessary. But he shouldn't have seen them, nevertheless. They do not come through with me so to speak. I leave a great deal behind.'

'I...see.' Leon's jaw tightened. He was no half so equable as he pretended. 'I booked a room at the Yew Tree. And yes, I think I would like another drink, please.'

'Very forward-thinking of you. You were taking things rather for granted, were you not?'

'Perhaps,' Leon said slowly. 'I did get the impression you preferred people who could think for themselves.' Then he got to his feet. 'I don't know how to talk to you!' he exclaimed. 'I thought I would, but seeing you even now, glamoured, trying to look as much like us as you can...knowing what you really are —'

'Thou hast no idea what I really am, Leon St. Cloud.'

The room stilled as if someone had dropped it into a zone of silence. Leon's eyes were wide. 'And so you had better pray you can be useful.' Vanimöré smiled without humour. 'Because otherwise...?' He left it hanging.

'I know what you think of me,' Leon said tightly. 'A spoiled little rich boy trying to prove himself?'

'You are a spoiled little rich boy, and you *are* trying to prove yourself. To me, currently.'

Leon's eyes positively blazed. Vanimöré half-expected him to attack, but after an internal struggle Leon shot: 'Yes, I'm privileged — aren't you?' he flung out one hand to encompass Summerland, Vanimöré's colossal wealth. 'My parents lived and breathed their horses, left me to Eton and to do what I wanted. My great uncle was more of a father to me, and from him I wanted to believe there was *more*—'

The door pushed open. Howard burst through. 'Lucien,' he said, all banter gone from his tone. 'You're going to have to see this.'

The video came through a heavily encrypted channel. The bodies had been flown to Blandford to be examined. Vanimöré watched as Chez's body was stripped. He had worn a black tee-shirt

which, when it was cut off revealed a thin silver chain strung with a gold ring. It was standard procedure within what Howard called the 'DDE' ('Dept that doesn't exist') to catalogue all tattoos and jewellery of any 'casualties' — specifically gold rings that might look exactly like wedding rings.

Edenel, ask Samael if Chez wore a wedding ring around his neck, on his finger, anywhere.

He says not, Edenel replied after a moment. He did not believe in that kind of thing; thought men wearing jewellery, even a wedding ring, was "poncy". Samael says he will ask his mother, who might have seen more, but Chez had a habit of going bare chested in the spring and summer, at least indoors. Sam would have seen that necklace if Chez wore it.

And yet, here it is. Vanimöre looked at Howard. 'I want that brought to me as soon as possible.'

It was also standard procedure that the DDE familiarised themselves with the Silmarillion, Unfinished Tales and the Lord of the Rings — with the understanding that the writings were heavily biased and a great deal was never even recorded.

'You think—?' Howard turned to him.

'If it is, it would be a very low-power artefact,' Vanimöre murmured. 'Even so, I am surprised anyone would give it to that lout.'

'Ronnie Trent,' suggested Leon. 'Chez was feeding around the edge of the Far Right for years, doing nothing, being nothing. Threats. Talk in pubs with his cronies, that kind of thing. It's only since Trent purchased the bookmaker's where Sam worked that things seem to have changed.'

Vanimöre recalled Samael's words: '*A lot of gold..*'

'Possibly. I think we need to turn our attention on Ronnie Trent, Howard.'

'I knew you'd say that.' Howard closed his eyes. 'Our Ronnie's involved with a lot of unsavoury operators, Steele. Russian Mafia connections, drug cartels out of Mexico, human traffickers, money laundering, all the usual suspects. We take him out, and the blast radius will stretch to hell and back.' He picked up a whiskey glass and drank.

'Not if he is seen as a liability,' Leon suggested, blue eyes keen and very bright. 'They'd drop him like a hot coal — or take him out themselves.'

Vanimöre laughed. 'I like it,' he approved. 'Taking Samael to Rochford Manor was a mistake. Chez was the weak link there. Ronnie's appetite for young male virgins is another one.'

'Oh, Ronnie would be careful enough while building his little empire,' Howard said dryly. 'He'd use prostitutes or street kids. Now, I suppose he thinks himself powerful enough to indulge in his vices. Chez called his contact number, not to speak to Ronnie personally, but one of his men, and asked for help to get Sam back. I think he expected them to come in mob-handed or something, but Ronnie's not that stupid. Chez lost him; it was up to him to deal with it. Ronnie certainly wanted Sam back, said he'd kneecap Chez if he didn't get him.' Howard snorted. 'I think he must have been watching The Long Good Friday on repeat since the 70's. But he wasn't willing to send his own guys out. Said it couldn't be that challenging.'

‘Hmm, so Chez definitely had an incentive to come,’ Vanimöré mused. ‘Ronnie won’t pursue it, I think. Not when he learns Chez and all his friends are dead. Better to just write it off as a loss. But we *do* pursue it, Howard.’

Howard threw up his hands. ‘Whatever. So. Rochford Hall was bought by a company called Arcadia Holdings four years ago. They lease it out as a business venue — the last year or so it’s been frequently booked by Gowan Entertainment, Ronnie’s company, for his...parties.’

Leon cleared his throat. ‘My great-uncle Roland owned it. He was never there much, but when I was young I used to spend some summer vacations with him. I know the place well. Good memories. It...annoys me that it’s being used like this.’

‘Human trafficking,’ Vanimöré said. ‘It’s a wonder, with his connections, that Ronnie Trent hasn’t come up on the police radar before now.’

‘Oh, he has, but like I said, everything’s above board on the surface,’ Howard said. ‘He was never on the DDE’s radar, that’s for sure. He’s just another crook, and there’s a lot of them. You know our interests are rather more esoteric. Everything I’m telling you now, I learned since yesterday. However one of the reasons might be that he has a couple of high profile government ministers visiting him there.’

‘I see.’ And he did.

‘Which is why I warned you about the blast radius, Steele. If we do anything, we’ll come up against MI5, MI6 and...you name it. It could get ugly.’

‘Hmm.’

‘All very well to stand there looking like the damn Sphinx,’ he snapped. ‘What’s the plan?’

‘I’m thinking.’

‘Care to share?’

‘Not yet.’ He smiled. ‘Quite a coincidence.’ He glanced at Leon. ‘That Rochford Manor was in your family.’

‘I suppose so,’ Leon replied levelly. ‘Coincidences do happen. But —’

‘But?’ Vanimöré prompted.

‘Nothing, really. It’s just, the manor is supposed to be haunted. There’s a standing stone in the grounds. Roland loved the place, used to set up tape recorders in the old days, and cameras — way before these t.v. shows they have now. I don’t know if it’s relevant or not. Peter Underwood, who was president of the Ghost Club for years, visited back in the 60’s.’

Vanimöré frowned. ‘I won’t discount anything, though I doubt Ronnie Trent was interested in the paranormal.’ he turned to Howard. ‘Who are these Arcadia Holdings?’

‘Just a consortium of businessmen.’ But Howard scowled. ‘Okay, I’ll get on it.’

‘Thank you. And I’d like to know when our dear Ronnie books the Manor.’ He turned. ‘I need to

Speak to Samael. Please make yourselves at home.'

'Dinner is most definitely on you tonight, Steele,' Howard threw at his back as he left the library. He lifted a hand in acknowledgement. '

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Edenel and Coldagnir were in the long drawing room, sitting far enough away from Samael not to crowd him, but close enough to be supportive. As Vanimöré entered they rose, came toward him their eyes, glass-white and burnt bronze and kissed him, one after another, deeply, slowly. It was all there: each of them shared their grief of a universe lost. They were some of the few survivors. Trailing their fingers across Vanimöré's shoulder, they went from the room, closed the door quietly behind them.

Sam was sitting with his hands driven between his knees, fingers gripped together. An empty coffee cup stood on the table.

'How do you feel?' Vanimöré asked gently.

'I'm going to have to talk to Mum,' he said resolutely, coming to his feet. 'Before the police come.'

'Do you *want* to tell her you killed Chez?'

Sam stared. 'I don't...but I *did*.'

'And we need to talk about that.' Vanimöré laid a hand on the taut young shoulder, pressed him back down. 'How do you feel?'

Sam gazed down at his hands. 'How am I supposed to feel?'

'There is no one way, Samael.'

'I suppose not.' He gripped his hands together again, looked up from under those long lashes, so vulnerable that Vanimöré instantly slammed his heart against the look that reminded him of Elgalad. 'Have you ever killed anyone?'

'Often,' Vanimöré said brutally. 'It is pointless to dwell on it. But you're going to. Chez deserved to die. I would have killed him had you not, and you would not be thinking about it now. But as it's your first time, I will listen if you want to speak about it.'

Sam turned red and then white. He came out of his seat, gaping. 'I know you're not human, I *saw* you change, I saw *them*.' He thrust out a hand, his breath coming in short sharp gasps, and then he began to laugh and cry at once. Vanimöré caught him by the shoulders, hard, fingers digging into the muscle.

'That is enough.'

Those grey eyes...he looked into them, into the boy behind them. 'No, we are not human and you should be glad of it. You are free, your mother is free. Do you regret it?'

Sam whispered: 'No.'

'His friends are gone too. *This* is the beginning of your new life, Samael. You cannot go back, you cannot undo what you have done. I wish I had killed him for you.' Chez had landed so heavily in the ditch that Vanimöre thought he would lay there, winded, for some time. 'I had vowed to.'

'I pulled him up,' Sam admitted. 'I wanted to hurt him.'

'Who can blame you? They say it is easier to kill a man from a distance, hardest of all to kill them close-to. I never felt that.' He shrugged. 'I was trained to kill and do it very well.' Impulsively, he took Sam's face in his hands, the fine bones like smooth marble. 'I do wish I had killed him for you, but sometimes it is more satisfying to kill your own monsters, Samael.'

Sam's eyes, dry now of tears looked unblinking into his. Those eyes...and that face. By the time he reached thirty he would have the stern beauty of stone angel set in a Cathedral niche. 'Yes,' he said softly. 'It was.'

'You fight well, for someone not trained,' Vanimöre remarked, drawing his hands away. 'Who taught you?'

Sam almost laughed. 'YouTube videos. I couldn't go to lessons, could I? I just practiced when he was out, and used things around the house for weights.'

'Clearly you have an aptitude, and are made for more than gardening.' As Sam began to protest, he said, 'I mean to give you a job, don't worry. But I think Apollyon Enterprises and the DDE may need you more than Summerland.'

'The DDE?' Sam repeated bewilderdly.

'The Department that Doesn't Exist, as Howard calls it,' Vanimöre said with a smile. 'In fact it's called Global Scientific Research and Defence. It exists within MI6. Originally it was created around the same time as the Second World War to deal with individuals who are not quite...normal, or not human; also to deal with *me*. In fact, I fund them. A lot of countries have similar departments within their intelligence services and Howard, who heads it in this country, has ties with most of them. It works in the background to monitor and sometimes protect people who would otherwise be experimented on or used in war. In fact, some have been. No country is quite to be trusted when it comes to us.'

'You're not human, then?' Sam's voice sounded far away.

'Humaniform,' he corrected. 'Technically most of us can breed with humans and have common children, so we're not biologically alien, but we are not Mortal.'

'Then...then, what are you?' It was only a thread of sound.

'Some are Elves, some like myself, Coldagnir and Edenel — who was once an Elf — you might call gods.'

Sam closed his eyes, white-faced. 'That's...impossible. This is completely insane. You...your eyes, and theirs. No-one has eyes like that.'

The colour had burned through the contacts, hastened by the dropping of his glamour. Too late now.

'Never mind my eyes. It is impossible only from the standpoint of many of minds of this world,' Vanimöre dismissed it calmly. 'And yet, here we are. Now, we can work through this, but to come

back to the point: do you really want your mother to know you killed Chez?’

The lovely mouth crooked into a grimace. His eyes opened, dazed, a little wild. ‘I suppose not. But what’s...what’s the story? The helicopters, the soldiers...’

‘That is what Howard is for,’ Vanimöre said with a faint smile. ‘It gives him something to do. There will be no comeback, Samael, I promise you.’

The clock in the lounge ticked, quiet, soothing. Outside, the lawns dreamed in the afternoon sun. Sam’s eyes looked away, beyond the window, as if seeking the real world, normal, predictable, that must exist still. Then his chest rose and fell in a long breath.

‘Working for you would entail signing the official secrets act, I suppose?’ He asked. ‘And I’ve no choice anyway, have I?’

Vanimöre smiled at him; it felt cold around the edges. ‘None at all,’ he agreed gently.

OooOooO

~ Footsteps in Memory ~

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

~Footsteps in Memory~

‘How’s the boy?’ Howard asked, as the Bentley purred out onto the road. ‘And I hope your *lover’s* not going to blow a tyre,’ he added irritably. ‘That would really put the icing on today’s shitcake.’

‘He is with his mother at the moment,’ Vanimöre replied. ‘I think there will be some guilt there, on her part, that she is now now free. Emotions are complex things, after all. But once she learned that her husband had sold her son, she probably wished she could kill him herself. Some women have killed their partners, and most of them deserved it. And no, Sören’s not going to blow a tyre.’ He smiled to himself, smoothed the palm of his hand around the wheel. ‘He can take a *lot* of handling, Howard.’

From the back, Leon made a sound suspiciously like a snort. He said, after a moment, voice returned to crispness: ‘Is Sam a liability.’

Vanimöre was driving them to a restaurant a few miles away. Leon, it had been arranged would stay at Summerland tonight, rather than the Yew Tree. After the meal, Vanimöre would drive Howard to Blandford, where a helicopter would take him back to London.

‘I think not. I will keep an eye on him.’ Vanimöre met Leon’s eyes in the mirror, warning. ‘He seems to be coping not too badly, considering.’

Although he had spent years in different modern worlds, still it was not the same as his old life, where men went young into the army and expected, even hoped, to kill their enemies. The first kill was always difficult, but they were at least mentally prepared for it. Sam may have wanted to kill Chez, perhaps for years, but thinking about it was a long way from doing it.

The story that would appear in the news was that Chez and Jeff had become mixed up with criminal elements who had enacted a ‘gangland-style’ revenge on them and their friends. The villagers, and John Lawson at Southview, had seen the helicopters fly in, and the road had been taped off with a police presence for some hours, so they knew *something* had happened. Madge, returning from Plymouth with her sister, was horrified to learn that her brother-in-law and his friends had been on the way to her home and grateful that they had never reached it. Gossip was already flying, with a certain wide-eyed ‘Isn’t it awful?’ vicarious enjoyment. The Yew Tree Inn, as Vanimöre passed it, was doing a thriving trade, car park full. There were also some local reporters, but since the event had nothing to do with their sometimes-resident billionaire, Vanimöre was not concerned. Howard would step in if necessary.

He said, ‘Sam will stay with his mother tonight. No doubt they have much to talk about. He will

also tell Julie that she need not be concerned about finances, henceforth.'

'Are you serious about wanting to employ him?' Howard asked.

'Perfectly serious. He has potential and he's very bright. I think I will attach him to Apollyon Enterprises for now, however, train him myself, and then we'll see.'

Howard shrugged. 'So what now? Are you going into Rochford Manor in the style of the SAS when next Ronnie Trent rents it out?'

'Possibly,' Vanimöré smiled. 'I will want you there Leon, as you know the house and grounds. Think you can handle it?'

'Absolutely,' Leon asserted. 'Mr. Steele, as you probably know, one of the advantages of being wealthy is that one can pay for a great deal. I was trained in the RAF of course, but when I was seconded to the SAS in Afghanistan, I picked up more from them. A lot more. They couldn't have some snowflake slowing them down. Their captain put me in touch with a retired SAS officer when I got back. I paid him to continue that training. Maybe not the same as Credenhill,' he mentioned the SAS barracks near Hereford. 'I didn't rappel out of helicopters for instance, but...'
His face closed.

'Leon passed the selection course for the SAS,' Howard said rather primly. 'Just before we picked him up.'

'Impressive credentials, would you rather have joined them?'

Leon gave a twisted little smile. 'There's one thing they're lacking.'

'And what is that?'

'You,' Leon said. 'And others like you. The mystery.'

'It's not really a mystery,' Vanimöré told him. 'Just very, very unbelievable.' Even he had to admit that.

The excellent meal went some way to pouring oil on Howard's troubled waters. While his salary would make many CEO's gnash their teeth, he was a careful man with his own money and absolutely scrupulous regarding his departmental 'expenses'. In some convoluted way — although logically he knew 'Lucien Steele' *paid* his expenses — buying himself a good meal with them was an indulgence he would not permit himself.

'How is our mutual unfriend,' Vanimöré asked, sipping mineral water. 'Do you know he met Samael in London the Christmas before last?'

Howard wiped his mouth with a napkin. 'Hmm, did he? Coincidence?'

'I tend not to believe in them, Howard. It just means we are not seeing the bigger picture.' *And unless I return to the Monument, I cannot see the whole picture.* glanced at Leon who stopped chewing and swallowed.

'You mean Rochford Manor?'

Vanimöré nodded.

'He's well enough. Not much can hurt him,' Howard continued, dryly. 'Living not far from here at the moment, too, on the edge of Dartmoor, though he travels quite a lot.'

Poor Maglor, although thou canst not leave here, not yet. When the echoes of Dagor Dagorath strike this world, then many things will change, I think. That is what I wait for. And if not, I will change them myself.

It was dusk when Vanimörel dropped Howard off, the guard at the checkpoint standing back, blind-eyed. They drove through the half-light like a liner cruising a sea of dim and scented green. The police tape was gone from the road, as were the cars. As they passed the spot, Leon turned in his seat.

'I'm not sure I'll ever forget today.'

'Not the first time you've killed though is it?' Vanimörel raised a brow. 'Afghanistan?'

'More than one kill. I understood it might happen. I can't say I lost any sleep over it, either.'

'Easy enough to kill a man with a gun. Now with a knife, or one's own hands, that is a little different. And you may have to, Leon.'

'I understand,' he returned stiffly.

A moon, gold as candlelight, was waxing and the pines shivered in the mild breeze. Leon stood for a moment, looking across the gardens of Summerland to the calm darkness of the sea.

'Mr Steele, the tumulus,' he said. 'Where is it?'

'At the back, some way into the trees. I'll show you tomorrow.' he lead the way up the front steps. 'A nightcap?'

'Thank you, yes.'

Soft lamplight gilded the small salon. Vanimörel pulled the curtains across the window and poured drinks, inviting Leon to sit down.

'You understood who Howard and I were referring to at dinner?' he asked.

'Maglor Fëanorion,' Leon replied with a strange smile. 'It sounds odd even to say it, but yes. Strange, as Roland was a huge fan of Tolkien, and I read the Lord of the Rings and the Silmarillion on my summer vacations there, although I think he believed Elves were an alien race from the stars or something. He was fascinated.'

'You never thought the books were in any way the truth?'

'Well, no.' The public-school drawl was pronounced. 'It's not the sort of thing one believes *can* be true, is it? I wished it *was* an ancient history, rather than just a fantasy novel, but I'm sure many people did and do. At Rochford, I used to get up at dawn sometimes and walk to the tumulus hoping to see an Elf come out of it.'

Vanimörel thought of Claire James in another world who had thought the same thing about Tolkien's works until she met one Maglor Fëanorion and later, he himself. He smiled faintly.

'You loved it there. It sounds as if your great-uncle was a surrogate father to you.'

Thick lashes shaded Leon's eyes as he frowned into his glass. 'He was. Don't misunderstand me, my parents are good people, harmless. Dotty, in a nice way.' His mouth creased in wryness. 'Father is very like Roland was except his obsession is horses. He seemed not to know what to do with a

child except give me everything I wanted, but what I really wanted were parents who took an interest in me, were proud of me.’ Vanimöre well understood that particular need. Leon rose abruptly. ‘You don’t need to hear this.’

‘Consider it the interview I never gave you,’ Vanimöre suggested. ‘How long ago did your great-uncle die?’

‘Five years. I was in the RAF then, and anyhow...he never married, but seven or so years ago he met a woman and she moved into Rochford. He was slowing down then, suffered from angina.’

‘You didn’t like her.’

‘No.’ Leon turned back. ‘I didn’t like her. A boy’s jealousy you might call it and maybe you’re right but...she was a lot younger than him for one thing and—’

‘Not your class?’

‘I have no idea,’ he said frankly. ‘She sounded European, maybe Romanian, something like that. Tall, thin, long black hair, white skin. She was incredibly beautiful, huge black eyes, red lips, long painted nails, beautifully groomed and dressed but I always thought of her as *cold*, watching from behind her eyes. And predatory. I imagined, because of her accent, that she was a *Strigoi*. I’m not racist,’ he added quickly. ‘It was just the picture fitted.’

Vanimöre had stiffened, thinking of another beautiful black-haired woman that had called herself Kate Barrington.

‘And she...propositioned you?’

‘How the *hell* can you know that?’ Leon flushed to his hairline and took a drink. ‘Stupid question, Leon. Yes, then. It was the last summer I was at Rochford. Roland rang me, to invite me, and told me about her, Elena. He was...excited, obviously madly in love and wanted me to meet her. I was pleased for him, honestly, as he’d never had anyone special as far as I knew. But when I met her...’ He paced to the window and back. ‘It was just before I applied to join the RAF. I hadn’t wanted to go to university, because I didn’t have a clue what I wanted to do, really. It wasn’t even necessary I do anything.’ He smiled mockingly. ‘Privilege, you know. My father, rather vaguely, suggested I go into business as a trainer, and train some of his horses. He had the idea that I could go and work with a trainer for a couple of years to learn the ropes. I liked horses, but it wasn’t what I wanted to do. Still, neither did I want to do nothing. So, when Roland called me that summer, I thought I would use the time to think.’

Vanimöre waited. Leon came back to his seat, sank down. ‘Perhaps I needn’t tell you this but I’m bisexual.’

‘Howard knows that a person’s sexuality is of no concern to me,’ Vanimöre said calmly. ‘And putting people in boxes is so...restricting, don’t you think?’

Colour still heightened, Leon ran his fingers through his hair. ‘Fine, then. So I admitted to myself Elena was gorgeous, but it was the way a poisonous plant was beautiful. Have you seen the berries of Deadly Nightshade, so shiny, and luscious and edible-looking?’ Vanimöre nodded. ‘I just didn’t understand how Roland was so besotted. And he was.’ His mouth twisted. ‘I was in the kitchen. There was hardly any food in the place except some old tins and packets. Elena was so thin I imagined she didn’t eat much, and Roland had lost a lot of weight. I’m not the kind of man who thinks a woman should look after her man, that’s just archaic, but I do think if you care for someone you naturally look after them. So I was making soup and sandwiches for lunch and she came into the kitchen, close to me. The scent of the soup suddenly smelled vile, like offal cooking.’

She put her nails on my cheek — and they were sharp — and said, “Such a *pretty* one, so sweet.” And she turned my head toward her and kissed me, but it was foul, not because she was a woman but because she didn’t *feel* like one. Her kiss tasted like blood. I froze, and she pulled away, laughing. She said, “You need to grow up a little, pretty boy, but then, you will be well worth it, I think.” And she walked away as if nothing was wrong, as if she were absolutely certain I would say nothing.’

‘She knew you would not, that you would not upset your great-uncle.’

‘Of course I wouldn’t,’ Leon agreed angrily. ‘I tried to keep out of her way after that. I even pushed a chest of drawers up against my bedroom door. When she saw me she would smile, a secret smile as if we were colluding. It made me feel nauseous. But I shortened my stay and when I got home applied to the RAF. I didn’t see Roland again for a while. I phoned him at times, but rarely got hold of him. She would answer, saying he was resting, or out, or some other excuse. I worried about him but it was two years before I saw him again.’ He paused. ‘I drove down one Easter and he...he told me to get out. I’d never seen him angry. He almost foamed at the mouth, shoved me out of the door. He looked well enough, if thin, but his eyes were...odd. I thought for a moment of Alzheimer’s, then it became very clear why he was so angry: He accused me of trying it on with Elena.’

‘Clever of her,’ Vanimöré mused.

‘So I went to the car, looked back at the house. She was standing at an upstairs window, just smiling. Blew me a kiss. I was furious, but knew there was no way that Roland would listen to me and my father, who he was closest to, was worse than useless; just said it wasn’t our business if Roland wanted to make a fool of himself.’

‘She cut him out of the herd very neatly, yes,’ Vanimöré said. ‘And easily, as he was not a man with any close connections, save yourself, and you saw how she managed that.’

‘Yes.’ Leon’s jaw clenched. ‘And so, he died. Of a heart attack in his sleep, apparently.’ He slanted his brows at Vanimöré. ‘He made over everything in his will to Elena, and no-one contested it. Rochford Manor, the lot. The next thing I learned and that only recently, was that she sold it.’ He fisted one hand, brought it down on the arm of the chair. ‘I didn’t even go to his funeral. She never notified anyone! He was buried before any of the family were contacted.’

‘She sold it to Arcadia Holdings.’ It was a statement. Vanimöré sat back in his chair and considered. Howard had investigated the businessmen who formed the consortium and nothing jumped out at him, but he would dig deeper tomorrow, when back in the office. He said slowly, ‘You know who the lovely Elena is, of course?’

Leon looked at him. ‘I..don’t...’

‘Thuringwethil. It’s very much her style, and Thuringwethil has always, even at the beginning, served Sauron.’

OooOooO

‘Thuringwethil,’ Ednel pronounced the name with ice-shards in his mouth. ‘She killed him, yes, even if there was no proof.’

‘An energy drain, probably...not the way she hoped to kill Claire, but more subtly and over a longer period.’

‘It is the house,’ Coldagnir said. ‘It must be. And Thuringwethil has never worked on her own. Sauron would never allow it. She is a useful tool but only when wielded by an expert hand.’

‘Yes,’ Vanimöre agreed.

It was the still time before dawn. The lights were off in the library, but none of them needed illumination to see. Coldagnir and Ednel had their own internal glow, and their eyes were preternatural in the gloom.

‘Perhaps this Ronnie Trent is nothing,’ Ednel suggested. ‘We should be looking more closely into Arcadia Holdings.’

‘We will, but *some-one* gave Chez Bennet a minor ring, and somehow I cannot see my father associating with him.’ He slid the ring from his pocket. There was a very faint heat, a suggestion of buzzing against his skin, like the last spasms of a dying fly, but nothing to the weight and toxic power of the One. ‘And anyhow, if he is raping trafficked people in Rochford Manor, I intend to deal with hm.’

Unlike Howard, they did not object. Coldagnir even smiled. ‘Of course.’

‘I would prefer this house not to go up in a supposed gas explosion, Nemrúshkeraz,’ Vanimöre warned and then laughed softly as Coldagnir’s eyes burned into twin suns. ‘Not unless there is no other choice.’*

‘I will try to remember.’ The God of the Sun inclined his lovely head.

‘It may be simply an occasional base, it may be more, but I would like to explore it a little, after. And Ednel, I would like thee, at some point, to contact Maglor. He is living not far from here.’

‘Maglor.’ Ednel’s eyes grew golden sparks in the glass-white, like a battery of sunlight across a virgin snowfield. He unfolded long legs, learned forward. Neither he nor Coldagnir had been in this world before, but most were so similar they were now accustomed, at least as much as anyone could be. Survivors.

‘Is he alone?’ Ednel asked.

‘Yes. And he cannot and will not return to Valinor with the Valar still enthroned, with those he loves gone. But he *does* need to know there is hope at long last. And there is, I will ensure it. When the effects of Dagor Dagorath are felt on this world...but that may not be for a long time; there is no indication, no presentiment within me.’

‘Nor in us,’ Coldagnir agreed. ‘What wilt thou do?’

‘Anything I have to. Anything to make it *right*.’

‘Assuredly, I will see him,’ Ednel promised.

‘The Vanimöre of this world served Sauron. He has an even more valid reason to hate me than in our world-that-was. But that Vanimöre is, thankfully, dead.’ He told them, with a grimace of diastase. ‘If he can be made to believe that I am not the same person, and wish him no ill, rather the

reverse, that would be useful.’ It was also very unlikely to happen.

Edenel leaned to kiss him. ‘I will.’ He drew back and his eyes scanned Vanimöré’s face, said softly: ‘It is good to see thee here.’ And then, after a moment: ‘Be careful.’

They would not say it, but Vanimöré knew they had noted Samael, seen how he had stepped so easily back into his role as a protector, just as he had been before.

For a long time, Vanimöré could not speak of what happened after the Ending: Eru-Elgalad’s Ages-long deception. He had almost feared what the rage and shame consuming him might do if he unleashed it. But, after, when he was alone, he forced himself to think and realised it had to be related, that others beside himself needed to know.

Because Eru-Elgalad had also survived Dagor Dagorath. Naturally. Like Vanimöré, nothing could destroy him and Vanimöré, to his fury, still had no idea what his betrayer, once lover, truly *wanted*. It might indeed have been to gather that part of him that was Melkor into himself again, to be whole. Or that might be more utter bullshit. It was impossible to know. He was the one being, the only one, Vanimöré could not read, or find or *know* because he came from an older universe. He could hide himself. As he had.

And so he told them, as briefly as possible, internally crippled with embarrassment at confessing his own gullibility. At the end, he had also said, ‘Be careful.’

Now, he shrugged, smiled wryly. On the other side of Dagor Dagorath, he was not the same person who had opened his guarded heart to the young child growing into the boy, into the young man, whom had seen in Elgalad something he did not possess: innocence; someone he could love without guilt, and who had appeared (pretended) to adore him. He had never quite believed in that love, but (Or so he thought) Elgalad had no disguise. *But, oh, he did, the greatest one of all.* Even Dana’s concealing of herself beneath Ungoliant’s unlight could not better Elgalad’s deception.

Their relationship had changed when Elgalad returned from his apparent death, Nothing was quite the same between them after, when Elgalad was revealed as a god (half-true) born into an Elf’s body.

Elgalad had told him he was following Eru’s orders. Of course he was. Vanimöré forgave him, but the trust could never quite be rebuilt. Eru was the great incalculable. And so indeed had he proved to be.

Sitting in the desolation of the Monument, he had wondered if Eru-Elgalad had wanted Vanimöré to destroy him — or try to. Such a collision of powers would have ended everything, left nothing behind at all, not even the shadow of a memory. Eru, whatever he had been before, had destroyed his old universe out of grief and fury; had he felt that only Vanimöré could be his judge and executioner?

Too bad, Vanimöré had thought. Live with it, just as I deserve to live with my own stupidity.

And so...he had danced other universes into being, because he could not bear to lose those he had loved and wanted to bring them back, but the betrayal altered him, perhaps forever. Considering himself from a distance, he thought it was for the better. The fact that he could create, out of his own spilled blood, ‘possibility’, was at least an indicator he could still care. And so, he had found that yes, he could love, but no longer required require love in return; he had retained his ability to enjoy in full the beauty of the ‘moment’, and could also leave it behind without regret, cherishing the memory. He was, in short, perfectly suited to a solitary existence on the ‘Outside’, except that it was not in his nature to do nothing; and he had not been born a god, much less an Overmind. Thus, the other worlds he had visited — and this one. A dream brought him here, but it had also given him another purpose.

As they said here: *Better to light a candle than curse the darkness.*

OooOooO

‘Good morning,’ Vanimöre said, as Leon entered the kitchen. ‘Tea, coffee?’

‘Coffee please.’ Leon was more casually dressed today, but still the wealth showed in the cut and material of his clothes. His black hair was damp from a shower.

‘How did you sleep?’ The coffee grinder whirled.

Leon looked at him sidelong. ‘Actually, not too well. Ah, an odd question, Mr. Steele, but does this house...is it haunted?’

Vanimöre placed the coffee, cream and sugar bowl on the table. ‘There are very few true ghosts, Leon, if you mean spirits bound to the world after death. Great grief might do that, or a power stronger than they.’ He remembered the ghouls of Dol Guldur. ‘What one mainly sees are glimpses through time. And those are everywhere.’ He took a seat. ‘what did you see, or hear?’

Leon drank some coffee. ‘I’ve seen, or imagined I have, ghosts before.’

‘That does not surprise; you are a sensitive, like your great-uncle.’ He stirred his own coffee. ‘You probably have Elven blood, far back. I have met those who possess it before.’ Not on this world but in others, Claire James was descended from Edanel and Culina. ‘It is rare, and always was and would leave little influence, but sometimes there is a throwback to it. As in your case, and your great-uncle Roland. It comes out in you in your ability to sense what we shall call the ‘supernormal’, and probably in your looks, and especially your eyes.’ They were an extremely unusual blue, the colour pure and deep as tinted glass.

Leon looked a little discomfited, pushing back his thick forelock of hair, but he said, ‘On our third interview, Howard did mention that. But there’s no legend of any such thing in my family.’

‘I doubt there would be,’ Vanimöre replied calmly. ‘Although one quite often finds names with ‘Elf’, in them. I am thinking of far longer ago, although,’ he added, ‘Not all Elves left Middle-earth, they simply moved to remote regions or used their glamour to allow them to live among men. A lonely life, that.’

‘Like Maglor’s?’

‘Yes, especially Maglor. But go on.’

‘I found it hard to get to sleep,’ Leon said. ‘So I got up about 2 o’clock, thought to maybe go outside, just to check on things, walk, see if I could find the tumulus.’

‘I will show to you soon,’ Vanimöre promised.

‘So I left the room, walked along the corridor to the top of the stairs and thought it was a trick of the light or something. It was just a shimmer at first and then seemed to come more clearly...a

woman running down the stairs toward the door.’ His eyes went distant, he sketched the air. ‘Young, red hair, or no, strawberry blonde, I suppose —’

‘—Rose-gold,’ Vanimöré corrected. ‘How interesting.’

‘That’s one word for it, I suppose,’ Leon said sardonically.

‘Interesting, because what you saw was not a ghost but something that happened here in Summerland, except in the Summerland in another universe.’

Leon put down his cup, stared at the table, frowning. ‘Howard said that you can pass between different realities.’ He sounded as if he were still having trouble getting his head around it.

‘Yes,’ Vanimöré acknowledged. ‘And Summerland exists in all the realities I have visited. What you saw was something that happened in one of them.’

‘I’m not sure if that’s more bizarre than thinking I saw a ghost. Was it...recent?’

‘Further back than the death of the old universe, and as near as yesterday.’

Leon’s expression slipped into simple puzzlement. ‘I beg your pardon?’

‘I was being obscure,’ Vanimöré explained, half-smiling. ‘Time means very little to me.’ He rose and refilled their cups. ‘Would you like some breakfast?’

‘I can’t allow you to make me breakfast, Mr. Steele.’ Leon’s tone was a little horrified.

‘Well, I am making some for myself. I made Samael lunch the other day.’ He took eggs out of the refrigerator. ‘You have to eat, after all.’

‘I’ll do it. I can actually cook a little. My parents were a bit lackadaisical when it came to meals.’ As he broke eggs and whisked, he glanced up. ‘What was she doing here, that woman?’

‘Claire James. She was beginning a long journey,’ Vanimöré set bacon on to fry, and cut up peppers and mushrooms. ‘And she is still upon it, in other worlds than this.’ He paused. ‘I wonder. She tangled with Thuringwethil, too.’

Leon looked up. ‘She did?’

Vanimöré eyed him speculatively. ‘I think you were exceptionally lucky, Leon St. Cloud. Or she was being kept on a very short leash is more likely.’

The young man’s face tightened. ‘I know she killed Roland,’ he said shortly. ‘To get Rochford Hall, I assume. But why? And why am I lucky?’

‘To the first question: I don’t know, *yet*. As to the second — I think you had better eat first.’

There was a knock on the back door. ‘Come in,’ Vanimöré called, and slowly the door was pushed open. It was Sam, looking fresh as the morning, A gold-bright angel drawn in the margin of an ancient bible. He looked from Vanimöré to Leon, and said awkwardly: ‘I wasn’t sure whether I should come, but you said you wanted me to start today.’

‘Come in, Samael,’ Vanimöré was rather surprised to see him after last night, but impressed. The young man had more backbone than might be apparent to the casual observer. He was reminded, poignantly, of his *Khadakhir* in that world, that universe long lost. He pointed to the table. ‘We are just having breakfast. Do join us.’

There was, after all, a great deal to talk about.

OooOooO

Chapter End Notes

In 'Chains of Eternity, by Verhalen,

<https://archiveofourown.com/works/18070109>

Maglor determined to kill Sören's pig of an ex, Justin. Vanimöré learned that Justin, a rising football star, frequents a house in London where teenage girls and boys, trafficked into the UK are and hurt. Vanimöré arranges that one of his contacts, acting as an Uber driver, take Justin to a lock-up in London Docklands, and Maglor kills him there. Meanwhile, a tall 'man' with brilliant red hair is seen to walk past the house Justin had used, just before a gas explosion ripped it apart.

This is also written of in 'Night of Blood' by myself:

<https://archiveofourown.org/works/18360239>

Claire James' experiences in Summerland are told in the story of the same name:

<https://archiveofourown.org/works/15795351/chapters/36757947>

~ Ghosts and Memories ~

Chapter Notes

Thank you to Narya_Flame for permission to use the name Arthur May antiques dealer.

Latter part of this chapter contains references to the 'Proto-universe', the one destroyed by Elgalad-Eru. This is not the 'Prime' universe destroyed at the Dagor Dagorath. In Magnificat III and IV 'Eru' spoke of a universe he had destroyed in grief and rage.

~ Ghosts and Memories ~

'How is your mother, Samael?' Vanimöré asked as he slotted the plates into the dishwasher. The breakfast had been eaten in almost silence, save for a few polite remarks. After, Leon had said he must do some work, and retreated to the library.

'She's...well, shocked and she cried, not for him,' Sam said hastily. 'I don't think for one moment it was for *him*, but because she was free.'

'I understand,' Vanimöré assured him, as they went out into the garden. And he did. His mouth curved in unpleasant memory. *It is so hard to be free. One can never quite accept it.*

'I didn't tell her...anything about me,' Sam shot him a sidelong glance. 'I did think about it even after I left here, but in the end, I couldn't upset her any more.'

Vanimöré nodded. 'Yes, I knew you were having second thoughts, but you are quite right. Your mother needs no more stress and worry.'

'Madge wants to take her away, before the tourist season starts. Neither of us have passports, and have to wait for our birth certificates to get one, but Madge was thinking of going to Cornwall, just the two of them.'

'Yes, that's a good idea. I'm sure John can deal with the park for a couple of weeks.' Vanimöré smiled. 'So, this is your first day of employment with Apollyon Enterprises. Come along. I can bring you up to speed as we work.'

Sam got to drive the mower, and enjoyed it. The air filled with the soporific scent of freshly cut grass as the day warmed, and gulls called over the sparkling sea. Vanimöré watered the flowers,

weeded, and at lunchtime they went in to wash.

Leon, without any prompting, had prepared Caesar salad for lunch and they sat down at the kitchen table.

'How much can we talk about?' he asked, with a glance at Sam.

Vanimöre spread his hands. 'Samael saw me unglamoured, Leon. Speak freely.'

'Very well, Mr. Steele.' Leon gave a small shrug. 'Howard came through with some more information on Arcadia Holdings and Rochford.'

'Go on.'

'All legitimate and above-board, except...' Leon pushed a piece of paper across the table. 'Three years ago, there was a lot of work done at Rochford including the excavation of the cellars. I knew there were cellars, but Roland always said they were damp and dangerous and kept the door locked.'

'Excavations,' Vanimöre murmured as his eye fell on the last name. 'Arthur May. An antiques dealer.' He looked at Leon. 'Antiquities...It is illegal of course, but did your uncle ever bring back relics from his travels?'

Leon's eyes widened. 'Yes,' he said slowly. 'I saw a few, when I was young, nothing special or valuable, I think. They were souvenirs to him, mementos, not treasures. I never saw anything that stood out; he would explain where they were from, what they were.'

'Hmm. Perhaps someone thought he had discovered something rather more interesting.'

'Hence Thuringwethil,' Leon agreed.

Sam turned to look from one to the other, lips parted. 'Thuringwethil?' His voice rose.

'You know of her?' Vanimöre asked.

'I've read Tolkien,' Sam said, flushing. 'I told you I liked to read. But...'

'Some thing one reads about are real, Samael. For better or worse.' Vanimöre raised a hand. 'We will speak of her now, in fact.'

Sam was silent, watching them. He laid his knife and fork down as if he could not eat the remainder of his lunch but, though his face had returned to its fine paleness, he was steady enough. He watched, and he listened without interrupting.

'I have no doubt,' Vanimöre said, 'that she did kill your great-uncle, but not in her usual manner. Her bite, or a scratch from her nails is poison. It would be recorded as Necrotizing fasciitis, but extremely swift acting and fatal. Immediate medical treatment might help. And then again, it might not. That, Leon, is why I consider you lucky.'

'My god.' Leon looked a little shaken.

'But it might have been hard to explain why a man died so suddenly of that and his partner had not called an ambulance or checked him into hospital. She drained him, energetically, over some time, slower but safer. It would look like a heart-attack, especially as he had a history of heart problems.' Vanimöre rose, gathered the plates together. 'She's quite clever, but her appetites tend to rule her, and so Sauron must, as I said, have kept her on a *very* short leash during that time.'

'Bitch,' Leon spat, eyes blazing. 'I want her to pay for that.'

'She can die,' Vanimöré told him, thinking with an inner smile of Claire crushing Thuringwethil's skull with a *Palantir*. 'She's tough, fast, quiet, but not invulnerable. Be careful, as we are likely to run into her again, perhaps soon.' He leaned back against the work surface. 'You never saw a woman at Rochford Manor, Samael? Tall, black haired, very beautiful?'

He shook his head. 'No, I saw no-one except the men. There were women there; I heard their voices, but I was taken straight upstairs...' He reddened a little, then pressed his lips together. 'But...then, what's the connection between this Ronnie Trent, and Thuringwethil and Rochford Manor?'

'This.' Vanimöré drew the ring from the back pocket of his jeans. 'Better if you do not touch it,' he warned as Sam put out a curious hand then, with a glance at Vanimöré's face, drew it back quickly. 'There have never been that many ring-makers; the most renowned were the *Gwaith-i-Mírdain* of Ost-in-Edhil in the Second Age. And Sauron, of course.' He closed his hand. 'And this is Sauron's.'

Sam seemed to physically stop himself from stepping back. '*Sauron* made this?' His eyes flashed from Vanimöré to Leon. 'This is crazy! I know what I saw, Mr. Steele, yesterday, but this is...' He trailed off.

Leon regarded him impassively. The two were about the same age, but so different it was almost fascinating.

'Our starting position,' he drawled. 'Is that almost everything in Tolkien's works is based on truth, even if it is heavily biased and simply the tip of the iceberg.'

'But...but Sauron?' Sam said helplessly. '*Sauron*, Sauron?'

Leon cast up his eyes. 'Yes, that Sauron.' But he, too, was nervous under the calm exterior.

Sam put his hands over his face for a moment. Through them, he said, muffled: 'I thought he was destroyed?'

'He is not human, Samael; he cannot be destroyed.'

'So, did the Valar not shut him in the Everlasting Dark, with Melkor?' Leon wondered. 'I asked Howard, but he said to ask you.'

'Not in this world. I think they did not care. He was diminished, and would be for a very long time. The Valar,' he added to Sam. 'Are not as beneficent as the books would have you believe, rather the reverse.'

Sam dropped his hands. 'They're not?'

'Apparently not,' Leon murmured.

'Over a long time, many thousands of years, Sauron would have regathered his energies and be able to take form again.' It would take a far longer time on this world, as he did not have a son as a living blood-link. 'And, even more gradually, his powers would return; at first enough to wear the appearance of a Mortal, to keep himself alive, moving from place to place and to search for any other servants of the Dark that might have survived into these latter Ages. Thuringwethil was originally a Maia, but of a lesser degree of power. She was corrupted in Utumno which was Melkor's first fortress when Angband was little more than an outpost. So Thuringwethil too, does not die, at least...not permanently. And there may be others.'

‘Our department has always known these things exist,’ Leon interpolated smoothly. ‘As, of course, does Mr. Steele.’

Sam blinked those aching clear doe-eyes. ‘You mean these tales and reports, even nowadays of strange things are real?’ he asked flatly. ‘Monsters, vanishings, aliens...glitches in the Matrix?’

‘Yes,’ Vanimöré said shortly, because Sam reminded him too much of Elgalad, but there had never been an Elgalad in this world. Not that it mattered, but Eru-Elgalad knew well enough not to come near Vanimöré. Whatever he was, or had been, and whatever he wanted, he was not a fool, and only a fool would try to appear as much like Elgalad as a Mortal could. Still, it was irritating, like rubbing a file down a barely-healed scar.

Vanimöré wondered sometimes, or had, until he put it from his mind, if there had been some entity that was Elgalad, himself alone, separate from Eru, and that Vanimöré had indeed killed him. After, there was only Eru. But to speculate was useless, threatened to drag him down into the pit.

Sam sat down at the table, stared at his hands and made a disbelieving sound. ‘What do we do? If Sauron’s here, what does he want?’

‘The same thing he always wants,’ Vanimöré told him with a flicker of chill amusement. ‘Power.’ He straightened. ‘Come, I said I would show you the tumulus.’

OooOooO

It was not a dramatic place, simply a grass-grown mound under the trees, Perhaps ten feet high but sinking, over time, into the earth. Tree shadows wove over it, and the air smelled freshly of pine. The path dipped down, through a kind of doorway propped by stone. Leon used the torch on his phone to shine it into the interior: there was only a short passage, then an inner chamber. Clean, dry with a scent of stone-and-earth, a few pine-needles driven in by the wind.

‘Watch.’ Vanimöré raised a hand and the air began to ripple as if light glissaded down a thousand harp strings. He heard Sam gasp as Vanimöré walked toward it — and was, for a moment back on the Outside, staring from the top of the Monument across the wind-blasted land. Lifeless, because there could be no life here, the power was too great. He loathed the place, and yet, more than anywhere else now, it was *his* place.

He turned his back on it, and stepped through the Portal.

‘Oh. My. God.’ Sam was wide eyed; so too, was Leon. ‘Where did you *go*?’

‘To the Outside,’ Vanimöré said. ‘Beyond this world, beyond the universes. But more generally, these places are a grid that connect other similar places on this world — and others.’

‘Can...*normal* people use them?’ Sam asked, a little breathless.

‘There have been reports of people disappearing in such places.’ Leon answered the question and Vanimöré nodded. ‘But usually that’s accidental, I believe.’

‘Come,’ Vanimöré gestured for them to leave. In the open once again, Sam rubbed his bare arms as if chilled.

‘Someone like me, or an Elf or, for instance, Sauron, can use them to travel to other places; as long as one knows where one is going. Otherwise it is a gamble. And no-one can go to the *Outside* unless that person is a god.’

They stared at him, mute for the moment. Leon regained his composure first. ‘Yes, Howard instructed me on that, Mr. Steele. So, the tumulus at Rochford?’

‘Yes, the same. Thuringwethil may have used it, after her work was done. And *we* will use it, when we go there.’

‘You can take people through them?’

‘I can, yes. You will be safe enough if I take you.’

The young men exchanged a look. ‘Is this like the teleporter in Star Trek?’ Sam asked disbelievingly.

‘Not really no.’ Vanimöré laughed. ‘Your atoms won’t be dissembled and reassembled. It is more like space being folded together, taking a piece of paper, and folding it up. To you, it will be like simply walking through a door into another room. Or rather, not you, Samael.’

He went rigid. ‘I want to come. If you’re going to take this criminal out, I want to be there!’

‘You are not trained,’ he replied gently. ‘I understand your need to see justice done, but be content for now, in that you did slay the monster who control and abused you and your mother.’

‘It’s not enough,’ Sam said stubbornly. ‘This Ronnie Trent...’ He swallowed, shot a glance at Leon. ‘You know what he did to me.’

‘Yes, Samael, I know, and I *do* understand.’

‘Do you? *Do you?* He thought it was *funny!* He laughed at me slapped my...my arse as he raped me. He *liked* it when I screamed. *I want to see him dead!*’ The words echoed back from the trees.

‘He will die, I promise you that.’ Vanimöré strode forward, cupped the outraged young face in his hands, said softly, as if gentling a nervous horse: ‘I do know, and I do understand, Samael. Hush. But you are not trained, as yet.’

Clear grey eyes glared back into his. ‘I don’t want to be *protected!*’

‘I am thinking of your mother.’ Abruptly, Vanimöré drew back and Samael dropped his eyes. ‘We do not know yet how often Ronnie uses Rochford for his rape-parties, or how long we have to give you even some basic training.’

Sam turned and walked away, his back a stiff line of youthful defiance.

‘Mr. Steele,’ Leon began. ‘I wouldn’t be surprised if Ronnie Trent is interested in what happened here — and worried. If he didn’t take out Chez and his friends, who did? Who else was Chez involved with? I think I’ll take a drive up to the Yew Tree, see if anyone’s around who might fit the bill. It’s a small place, and strangers tend to stand out.’

Let me give you the code for the gate,’ Vanimöré nodded. ‘When do you return to London?’

‘When Howard orders me back.’

‘Stay here until then. You absolutely do stand out, but as a guest of Lucien Steele, not quite as much. And we will talk more later.’

‘Thank you.’ He gave a charming smile but then, as he got into his Lotus, paused. ‘How much do you trust Samael Bennett, Mr. Steele?’

Vanimöré glanced toward the garden where he could hear the sound of the strimmer starting, Sam taking out his anger in physical labour.

‘I trust no-one absolutely, Leon St. Cloud. But do go on.’

Leon looked uncomfortable. ‘I know his story, and no doubt it’s true but...he’s almost the perfect honey-trap. He looks like Archangel Gabriel.’

‘I know all about that kind of honey-trap, Leon,’ Vanimöré said dryly. ‘And I have thought about it.’ Although not for the same reasons Leon had. ‘I’ll...er...be careful, although only a complete fool would try it.’ Or someone supremely confident. He smiled, smacked the hood of the the Lotus. ‘Nice car. Probably not as much stamina as Sören, but good for a one night stand no doubt.’

Leon gave a puzzled laugh. ‘Who *is* Sören, Mr. Steele?’

‘Someone, I know, in a place other than this.’ He threw a salute and walked into the house.

OooOooO

Sam came in later, hot, sweating, half-sullen, half-nervous.

‘Is there anything else you’d like me to do, Mr. Steele?’ he asked politely.

‘Yes there is.’ Vanimöré jerked his head. ‘Come.’

At the back of the kitchen was a door, which Vanimöré now unlocked, flipping a light switch, to reveal a flight of steps leading down. Sam showed a tendency to hang back, but Vanimöré descended the stairs casually. For a cellar, it lacked a certain cobweb-and-gloom aspect. It was clean, brightly lit, most of it taken up by gym mats, training apparatus and at one end, a shooting range. Vanimöré unlocked a safe and drew out a gun and ammunition.

‘It’s a Glock concealed carry the same as Leon is wearing,’ he said, placing it in Sam’s shrinking hands. ‘I’d like you to learn how to shoot it. Not at me,’ he pushed the muzzle away. ‘At those targets. When I judge you have mastered it, know when and when not to use it — because the last thing we need is someone blasting away for no reason and the law tends to get touchy when that happens — Howard will see you issued with a licence.’

Sam’s fingers opened and closed on the weapon gingerly. He swallowed. ‘I’ve never even touched a gun before.’

‘Well, no, this isn’t the USA,’ Vanimöré smiled. ‘But there may be times when you need to use it. First get used to the weight, and respect the weapon.’

'You can use one? Do you *need* to?' Sam asked.

'I can, yes, it's not my preferred weapon, but it can be useful. I will train you with knives, and in martial arts, too. Need to?' He shrugged. 'I will use any weapon that comes to my hand when I walk embodied upon the face of a world. Now, come. Let us begin.'

An hour later, they finished for the day. Vanimöré locking the door behind him. Sam's hands and arms were aching, he said, but he was smiling.

'Better to stop now lest you get stale,' Vanimöré said. 'You will become accustomed in time. Go back to Southview, have a shower and change, relax for the evening. Come back tomorrow about 9. And don't tell anyone you were firing a gun, yes?'

Sam shook his curls. 'Of course not,' he promised and went out of the door with a confident stride. Vanimöré smiled thoughtfully. Sam was confident only because he had handled a gun; now he needed to learn not to hide behind it. Any thug could shoot a gun and Vanimöré had seen often enough how, when you stripped a man of weapon, you stripped his courage, too. Yet Sam had done well with his bare hands, thought that could be sheer adrenaline. Killing in hot blood was one thing, in cold, which was how Vanimöré killed, quite another.

OooOooO

Leon returned when Vanimöré was preparing steaks. He came around the back, looked into the kitchen and waved. Vanimöré gestured for him to come in the rear door.

'Mr Steele,' Leon greeted.

'Anything?'

'Possibly. There's a man apparently looking at houses. Just checked into the Yew Tree. I didn't see him or I'd have got a picture for facial recognition, and I didn't have an opportunity to find out his name. I doubt it's that urgent. I'll check again tomorrow.' He shrugged, and offed his jacket. 'He's driving a flashy McLaren; the girl behind the bar was talking about it. Can I help?'

'You enjoy cooking?' Vanimöré asked, smiling.

'I don't know about *enjoy*, Mr. Steele. As I said, my parents were not marvellous when it came to food. They were content to eat out of tins and packets.' He rolled up his shirtsleeves and moved to a worktop. 'I often saw my father eating cold beans out of a can; he spent more time making sure his horses had vitamins and minerals in their oats, and spent more money on it too.' His mouth curled a little as he proceeded to chop mushrooms. 'So, for me it was learn to cook or exist on stale crackers and tinned soup.'

'I know the feeling.' Vanimöré remembered stealing scraps in Tol-in-Gaurhoth. He felt Leon glance at him. 'Will you be going out later? If not, you can choose the wine.'

'You never know,' Leon said. 'But one glass won't hurt, I'm sure.'

‘We can always take Sören if need be,’ Vanimöré murmured. ‘He can accommodate two.’

Since the Bentley could take four, Leon looked puzzled for a moment, and then seemed to understand, and shook his head with a self-conscious laugh.

‘Mr. Steele,’ he began a few minutes later, ‘I don’t want to presume, but what we spoke of before I left...have you thought about it?’

‘About Samael being a trap, or perhaps bait?’ Vanimöré smiled cynically. ‘A long time ago, I was played, Leon, and well. I am still not sure what he wanted, except that at the end I believed nothing that he said. I told Samael on Monday that I was not easy to pick up. And that is true. It always was true, but I have had my...moments of weakness. I trust he heeded the warning, if he *is* attempting it. But I think not.’

After a moment of silence, Leon said slowly. ‘I only ask because...How do we know that he was only once at Rochford? It wasn’t being watched, then, not on our radar at all. His mother wouldn’t know; Sam would be protecting her, Chez Bennett’s dead and can’t talk, nor any of his crew.’

‘You think he could be still be working for Ronnie Trent?’ Vanimöré paused. ‘It is possible I suppose, but what would hold him, now?’

‘Fear, maybe?’

‘Fear,’ Vanimöré laughed suddenly, then said quite kindly. ‘Leon, trust me. I was betrayed longer ago than the age of this universe and I am very much on my guard, now.’

The silence stretched this time; it prickled with fear. Then the sound of the knife chopping began again, staccato.

‘Howard said...no-one knows who or what you really are.’

‘Because it is not necessary.’ Thirteen billion years ago, in another universe, it might have been relevant. Now...? He looked down at his hands with a crook of the mouth. Unreal. It was all unreal, and hardly mattered. What did anything matter this side of the Dagor Dagorath? He glanced up, smiled. ‘Trust me.’

OooOooO

He slept and did not sleep, opened his eyes to the luminous dark, to a voice fading into the shadows.

He rose, left the house, felt the cool grass on his feet, heard the murmur of the trees, the night-sigh of the sea. When he turned to look back at Summerland, the house had gone. A palace rose there, a marvel of pinnacles and slender towers glowing with a soft white light. He thought of the Timeless Halls.

Stars blazed from horizon to horizon, but there were no constellations that Vanimöré recognised, and then he realised he was still dreaming. He did, at whiles, sitting on the Monument, slip into a

dream state, which worried him — his dreams created reality.

But there was no pain in this dream, just something remembered without stress. He could hear music, the sound of harp notes, and soft voices. In the dream, he knew he was feeling a strange kind of joy, a sensation of rightness that was all he had ever known. Then a hand came on his shoulder and he turned, blood burning up to enter into a kiss like starlight.

The man's face, when he drew back, was that of Elgalad-Eru, inhuman in its beauty, its power, but there was love in it, absolute as the Earth's foundations. They exchanged a smile that needed no words and their connection was deeper than love, something elemental and eternal. The silver head wore stars as a coronet.

And somewhere deep inside, Vanimórë's consciousness began to struggle against the connection, the love that had become betrayal, the deception that he could not, even now understand.

And then...*Stop*. His own voice, his own command from the *Outside*, from where he surveyed the multiverse. Because this was new...not something he had seen before, and yet it was *old*.

And there were unanswered questions.

Smoke and ash drifted like wraiths across a battlefield that spanned a world. An army, thousands strong, faced their adversary across a wasteland of fire. They had loved him — still loved him perhaps, but their battles against him had made their world a desolation and, because they were gods, that desolation had spread across the universe. Elemental and eternal that love had been indeed, theirs for him, his for them. And destructive at the end. Perhaps there is always a seed of destruction in the greatest of loves.

Their adversary stared at them across the earth raped by power. His hair, silver as a mirror, streamed from under his helm. His eyes, clear as dew, unfathomable, held the sheen of tears. There was the stipple of blood and smoke across his face — and on theirs too.

He tilted his head almost quizzically at them, one side of his mouth lifted in a smile that was wry, sad, challenging. The tears whispered down his face, then dried in the scorching heat of the dying world. They were like a last farewell kiss.

They watched him and his expression hardened at their silence, cold as marble, perilous; the look of a man pushed to his utter limit and then beyond it, and now willing to bring the final curtain down. Had he not given them everything? And in the end, had they not betrayed him?

There was a long moment of silence and then the opposing army *glorified* rising on vast and brilliant wings into the sky, transfigured by the power that built and built like summer thunder, filled the dead air with the scent of incense and cinnamon.

The man's gauntleted hand lifted to the sky — which exploded into fire with a detonation that almost shook the armies from the sky and him to his knees. There was, now, agony on his face. *What hast thou brought me to? What hast thou made me do?* He cried out; the fire flashed white hot — and...

A universe died in an instant...exploding to its furthest reach, taking everything with it in a firestorm beyond comprehension then imploded into nothing, scattering the souls of gods, their energy their patterns of consciousness, thoughts, dreams, the sum of their lives...

But...Nothing is ever ended...

Nothing is forgotten.

Vanimöré came out of the dream on a gasp for air, fingers clenched in the sheets. Moonlight lit the bedroom, but the light was gilded, weary; dawn was not far off. He crossed to the window, taking in deep lungfuls of the cool air, then spun on his heel and went into the bathroom, standing under the shower. He braided his hair, dressed, walked silently downstairs even as Claire's form ran past him, just as Leon had seen her. Almost he reached out a hand to her, to say, 'I am sorry, Claire,' but she was gone, across the hall, to the door, faded into the shadows. His hand dropped. Then the front door opened to a slice of sunlight cut by a slim shadow; a man walked in slowly, raven curls, a beautiful face, great dark eyes. Dust motes, I disturbed for years, sparkled as he entered, looked around the empty hall, up the fan of the stairs and, for a moment, it seemed he met Vanimöré's eyes, as if Vanimöré himself were the ghost...

Summerland...perhaps it was named that for a reason, a thin place...

He made coffee, took it into the garden and sat down. A fox trotted across the garden with a look at him, and a white owl ghosted overhead, hunting silently. The sea was almost still, even the pines caught no drift of air. It was the silent time before dawn, a time of memories and ghosts.

Edenel looked like a ghost himself as he came, silent as the owl. He knelt before Vanimöré and the numinous light gilded him. He looked so like Fëanor, like Fingolfin.

'What was it?' His dark brows were crooked, his mellifluous voice off-true, shaken.

'I think it was...' He raised his eyes to the stars. 'A memory...'

'Yes,' Edenel whispered. 'But a memory of what?'

He did not want to speak of it. Something inside him, ashamed, hurt, twisted away from it. He took a long draught of coffee. 'He said...he lied about so many things but this is true. He destroyed his old universe, thou knowest this. It was one of the reasons I did not trust him.'

Edenel's hands closed around his. 'Yes.'

'The ancient universe, that existed even before ours, the one that is gone.' He rose abruptly, Edenel with him. He could not speak for a moment, because nothing could bring it back, bring *them back*, and he *wanted them back*. He wanted to walk again in the Timeless Halls and see them, magnificent, powerful, passionate, come to godhood as was their birthright. He pushed a hand into his gut, bent over the pain of it, the *loss*.

'I know,' Edenel said, aching. 'Oh, I know.'

'We loved him.' He spit the words through his teeth. 'Somewhere, we loved him, and warred with him and he destroyed the universe, the proto-universe. Thou wert there, Edenel, and the others, some of them.'

'Yes.' Edenel shaped the word. 'Vanimöré...'

'I do not wish to think of him,' Vanimöré said. 'But...what are the answers to this? Where can they be found?'

Their eyes met. 'I felt I was there,' Edenel said slowly. 'That I loved him beyond anything, and hated him for what he had done. So where are the answers, Vanimöré?'

They knew. They both knew.

‘I thought, once that the answers were in his mind.’ Vanimöre looked into those white eyes that had seen so much. ‘And that was one place I did not want to go, and also could not. Now, I think the answers lie also in our minds. Our souls, perhaps thou wouldst say. And there, in that dead universe.’

‘But we cannot...’ Edenel stopped.

Vanimöre thought of the words he had heard, words he had also spoken, but in the beginning, they had not been spoken by him. They too, were a memory. He said, ‘Nothing is ever ended. Nothing is forgotten.’

OooOooO

~ Sorrow's Revenge ~

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

~ Sorrow's Revenge ~

~ Coldagnir came in with the sun's first rays over the hazy land, stepping out of the light in a flurry of flame. A second later and the glamour was in place, hair faded from scarlet to deep red, eyes to a quieter bronze.

'What can we do?' he asked directly.

Vanimörel shrugged. 'Coffee?' he suggested, as they walked into the quiet house. The cleaners would come in today, but not until 9 a.m. and Leon was still asleep.

'I do not know why I would dream of it — if dream is the right word — here and now,' Vanimörel said as he placed the coffee on the kitchen table. 'But it felt almost as if my true self, the part of me that is Outside and cannot come through into the physical universe, told me it was time to look, to *see*, not to withdraw from thinking of him.'

Edenel said after a moment: 'We know people from our own universe have been born into the new ones as Mortals, as punishment. Is it possible, we were born into our own universe from the original one that Eru destroyed.'

Vanimörel spread his hands. 'Perhaps,' he acknowledged. 'And certain things make sense...the people he loved and knew there, Elgalad,' he tasted the name like a bitter poison that had once been honey on the tongue, 'became close to them in our own world. He knew thee,' to Edenel, who nodded. 'And when he first met thee,' to Coldagnir, 'he pitied thee. He did not fear thee at all.'

Coldagnir's lips tightened. 'Yes,' he murmured. 'But I was not quite myself then, either, Vanimörel, and even that after I concealed my true self.'

'Yes, I know.' Vanimörel returned dryly. 'And I know that thou wert his servant almost until the end.'

'I did not know what he purposed,' Coldagnir said levelly. 'If I had known...' He looked away.

'Thou couldst have done nothing,' Edenel told him.

'He wanted to precipitate the Dagor Dagorath. Perhaps he thought we would defeat Melkor and then, when he was weak, Melkor would turn back to him, to Eru, even want their communion. I can think of no other reason.' But then he thought of Eru's words to him before the End. *I do not want him. I want the part of him that is thee.*

He pushed the memory away.

‘He reckoned without Fëanor,’ he said. ‘or rather, what Fëanor could do and would do, when Fingolfin was gone.’

There was a silence. Edenel and Coldagnir had been in the Monument, and not seen the moment Fëanor met Melkor-Ancalagon, but Vanimöré had shown them, after. Their heads bent in mute respect and love at the terror and glory of that ending.

Vanimöré closed his eyes for a moment, then took a steadying breath.

‘In New Cuiviénen...I thought — and still think — that Fëanor seduced Elgalad to make me furious enough to return, because that is so very Fëanor.’ He felt the sadness in the curve of his mouth. ‘But I wonder if that is exactly what Elgalad wanted: Fëanor and also Maglor. But who seduced who? And then, Tindómion became friends with him long before that, in Imladris, as did Glorfindel. And he knew the *Ithiledhil* In Mirkwood.’

‘Yes, he was one of the few who was welcome in our enclave,’ Edenel said. ‘Culina loved him. I think she was one of the few women he was intimate with. And yes, I think thou art right. He wanted to become close to those he had loved in his own universe.’

‘Loved — and destroyed. The greatest loves can become the greatest of hates.’ He had laid a fence around his mind, closing off Elgalad’s words, Eru’s, for his own sanity. Impossible of course, and now he needed to remember.

The words came up like dust in his throat. ‘He wanted thee to die, in the Dagor Dagorath. For thy souls be to be contained within the Monument, safe...Is it possible *he* was willing to destroy that universe, and rebuild another, with the souls of the ones he loved? But Fëanor took it out of his hands, and I...’

‘Thou didst stand in the way,’ Edenel whispered. ‘He could have done it, with thee. He needed thee, just as before, to build a new universe.’ His pale eyes seemed to enlarge. ‘Just as before...thou wert the repository of our souls, Vanimöré.’

Vanimöré stared at him. ‘When we...met, on the Outside, yes, I was carrying thee within my mind, but he did not expect to see me. He did not recognise me.’

‘Did he not?’ Coldagnir lifted his brows. ‘Perhaps he did, and there was still so much rage there, was there not?’

‘Yes,’ Vanimöré said, thinking. ‘Such rage, such hunger.’ *I must have what is within thee!*

Give thyself to me!

Vanimöré had fought against sublimation, poured his passion, his love into those that he loved, that he had loved before, in that ancient universe, those that *Eru* had loved — and come to hate, and had destroyed. He drew in a breath, sat bolt upright.

‘We know those who have been reborn into Mortality, yes,’ he said. ‘As a punishment. I believe the Elves were placed under the suzerainty of the Valar *as a punishment*— by *Eru*. All those he had loved were especially targeted. He was still, at that time, enraged, half mad, especially when I ripped out the essence of him that was Melkor. *His* punishment would have been worse. Eru’s, after, was colder. And I think he came to regret it, hence Glorfindel and myself ascending, the first ones, but not the last.’ And pushing him, always pushing him to become *more*. To become coeval.

‘What did he do to us to make us hate him?’ Coldagnir demanded, his eyes burning into solar fire. ‘And what did we do to *him*?’

Vanimöré remembered the face of Eru at the end, all its beauty and power and madness — and

grief. 'He loved us too much,' he said. 'And we loved him too much.'

OooOooO

That morning, Vanimöré took the Bentley to Plymouth to have the tyres checked, taking Sam with him. He still did not quite give credence to the nagging belief that Sam was Eru; it was better not to. He could not function if he gave it house-rom in his mind. In this form, Vanimöré could kill 'Elgalad', and easily, but the spirit would simply return to the Outside and leave a mess of grief behind. Julie Bennett would be the real victim if her 'son' died. Of course Eru would know that too, and also knew Vanimöré well enough to know what moved him to compassion. *Watch*, he told himself. *And wait. We can both play that game, Eru, can we not?*

'Meet us at the Yew Tree for lunch at about 1 o'clock,' he called to Leon, who raised a hand.

As they drove, Sam said that his mother and Madge were going away this coming Saturday and, with a glance: 'Madge told me you'd paid for them both to stay at the best hotel in St. Austell.'

'That's right,' Vanimöré agreed. 'Do you have any objection?'

Sam flushed. 'Objection? Me? Of course not! Thank you...I wish I could have done it for her.'

'You will,' Vanimöré smiled. 'Did you want to go? You've never been on holiday, I suppose?'

'Not since I was about ten, no. We went to a holiday camp.' He grimaced. 'But never did anything. Chez wouldn't allow it.'

'You'll have plenty of those too, and you will certainly travel,' Vanimöré assured him. 'Go if you wish.'

Sam shook his head. 'No, that's okay; I want to continue my training with you and it'll be nice for them to just be together. I wouldn't know what to do,' he said honestly, and Vanimöré looked at him.

'No, you're only twenty-four, you should have been doing all the things young people do.'

'I was asked, sometimes.' The answer was more than a little defensive. 'At work, but of course I couldn't, not having any money. And in the pub, when I went with Chez.' He looked straight ahead through the window. 'In the Gents toilet, sometimes people would offer me cash if I...you know.'

'Chez's friends?'

'Yes. The kind that were vile about gays in public.'

'Of course.'

There was a blur, a whack of air as a car overtook them, going at least 80 mph. A garish McLaren, top down, a fair-haired man driving.

'Idiot,' Vanimöré muttered as a prickle ran across his flesh like the brush of a wolf-pelt. He frowned.

‘You were driving faster than that the other day,’ Sam pointed out, drawing his attention back. ‘To a purpose; *that* was just showing off.’

‘I’d love to learn to drive,’ Sam said wistfully.

‘Hopefully not like that fool, but yes, we’ll get your license as soon as your birth certificate comes through,’ Vanimöré promised. ‘Perhaps you can even drive Sören. He’s a handful, but will always give you a good ride.’ Sam shot him the most adorably confused look, and Vanimöré choked on laughter that was too close to bitter, angry tears.

They pulled into the Yew Tree at just after 1 o'clock and Vanimöré wasn't surprised to see Leon's Lotus there — and the McLaren with the loud paintwork. Howard was seated in the dining area, but the McLaren driver was at the bar, talking with the girl, gesticulating, boasting. She maintained a fixed, polite smile on her face as if he both bored her and worried her. Vanimöré did not know her, save that she was the daughter of one of his cleaners, and crossed to the bar. Ellie turned to him with something like relief.

‘I’ll take the drinks over there, Ellie,’ he said and she nodded. ‘I’ll just be a minute, Mr. Steele. We’re a bit short-staffed today.’

The fair-haired man was watching him with a half-sneer. Fairly young, good looking in a bland way, but that was somewhat ruined by the superciliousness of his expression, the looseness of his mouth. The impression one got was of unpleasantness, like a bad smell, lingering after a slaughterhouse has been abandoned for years. It was not his appearance, however, that raised Vanimöré's hackles. Even as the McLaren passed him on the road, he had felt something, though the recognition was from different worlds. Justin Roberts, rapist, bully, and abuser. There was no Sören in this world, but clearly Justin was the same piece of filth in all of them.

‘You’re Lucien Steele?’ Justin asked the question with a posturing over-familiarity that he probably thought made him look like ‘one of the big boys’, someone who numbered multi-billionaires as their friends. Ellie sent Vanimöré an agonised, apologetic roll of the eyes, as if to say she hadn't told him.

Vanimöré slowly removed his dark glasses and looked down with bored haughtier.

‘Not to you,’ he said as if brushing off a nonentity and turning his back. Ellie snorted, turned it into a cough. Vanimöré felt the wave of animosity as he went through to the dining area. Leon nodded as he and Sam sat down, flicked his eyes toward the bar.

‘Sam.’ Vanimöré laid some coins on the table. ‘Put some music on, would you?’ There was an old-fashioned juke box in the bar. Sam looked at him, picked up the money and walked across to it. Vanimöré examined the menu while the music that would drown out their low conversation began.

Every man has a place, in his heart there's a space,
And the world can't erase his fantasies
Take a ride in the sky, on our ship fantasii
All your dreams will come true, right away
And we will live together, until the twelfth of never
Our voices will ring forever, as one

Vanimöre frowned, turned his head sharply. It was an old song, older than Sam. Vanimöre thought of a dream of warm summer nights and a nightclub, a time out of time...Sam, angelic head bent over the juke box, did not look up.

‘Justin Roberts,’ Leon said quietly from behind his own menu. ‘Interesting; used to be an up-and-coming footballer, played for the England Under 21’s, and for Chelsea for a time until they dropped him; drugs, wild parties; there was an allegation of rape, but it fell through, and rumours of more. An escort went missing a couple of years ago, and one of her friends told the police she’d made arrangements to meet Justin for the night. But her phone was gone, and she’s still listed as a missing person. There was no proof it was Justin, and you know how it is for sex workers.’

Vanimöre nodded. It was the same pattern with Justin, in every world.

‘Another spoiled little rich boy,’ Leon added with a self-mocking little smile. ‘His father was a loan shark before he made a fortune in pay day loans which, as you know, are the same thing, only legal — or were before the government cracked down on them. Roberts senior pretty much bank rolls the son these days. But Justin has greater ambitions than hanging on daddy’s coat tails, wants to shake off the association, the smell of the council flats. Snobbery exists in every strata of society, Mr. Steele.’

‘Ronnie Trent?’

‘I think Justin’s trying to “make his bones”, impress Ronnie. He may have been sent up here because Ronnie can deny everything if need be. Justin wants to connect himself with powerful people. Most of them are too intelligent to employ him.’

‘I believe it.’ Justin was a liability, only clever in the way an orc was, self-serving, selfish, sly.

Justin had sauntered over to the juke box, was saying something to Sam, who answered politely enough, but without encouragement, not turning his head. Justin leered (there was no other word) and spoke again, rudely moving into Sam’s personal space, who stiffened, flushed to his hairline and came quickly through to the dining area.

‘What did he say?’ Leon asked as Sam sat down.

‘Nothing.’ Sam picked up the menu, ruffled.

‘Samael,’ Vanimöre said softly, drawing the angry eyes up to his. Sam hunched one straight shoulder.

‘He...h-he asked if I was your bum-boy,’ he muttered. ‘He asked how much you paid me. And you,’ he added to Leon, who laughed.

‘Did he, now? I hope you said it was a lot more than *he* could afford, for either of you.’

Sam looked down again, cheeks burning. ‘I wish I had. What I really wanted to do was punch him in the face.’

‘Completely understandable, Samael. Forget him. Let’s order lunch.’

Vanimöré was not surprised when Justin Roberts followed them out of the inn, swaggering over to his car.

‘So, hey,’ he called, pugnacious, unlikable even if one did not know what kind of person he was. ‘Are you Lucien Steele or not?’

Vanimöré ignored him, opening the car door.

Justin swore only half under his breath, kicked at the tarmac. ‘Are you fucking deaf?’

From the other side of the McClaren, Leon watched quietly. Vanimöré nodded to him, said to Sam, who was positively bristling: ‘Get in Samael. Don’t touch, you don’t know what diseases you might pick up from it.’

Justin’s face suffused dark with anger. ‘Fucker,’ he enunciated viciously, bulling forward. Vanimöré stepped toward him. ‘I wouldn’t,’ he said, milk-mild. He had a foot on Justin, and this man was at heart, a coward. After a moment, face slackening, he turned back to his car.

Vanimöré pulled out, Justin, flinging himself into the McClaren, peeled out after him, tyres kicking up gravel. As Vanimöré suspected, Justin followed. He simply did not know when to let things lie. Leon, as instructed in the Yew Tree, swung in behind him.

Vanimöré did not turn into Summerland, but passed its gates, and Justin still followed, his face set into a rictus of anger. A mile on, Vanimöré turned off on a narrow road, little more than a lane. Justin turned with him, ignoring the ‘Private Road’ sign which was, admittedly, half-hidden by the lush growth of a flowering hawthorn hedge.

The land was Vanimöré’s, but that was not the reason for the sign. The road went nowhere, really, heading inland until five miles on, it came out in a small village on the main A Road. The land between, wood and pasture, Vanimöré had designated as a wildlife sanctuary, the pastures ploughed and sown to wildflower meadows. People walked there, he knew, tourists and locals, bird-spotters and ramblers, and he did not mind that; the reason he had closed off the road was because it hugged a disused quarry. The road crumbled there, and was dangerous. Barriers tended to become loose and fall away and, when the road was used, there had been fatal accidents.

Which was rather the point.

Sam looked around, back at him and smiled.

Vanimöré did not hurry, and Leon, behind Justin, held back for the moment. Justin seemed unbothered. Probably he had a gun in the car, and was not concerned that he was being hemmed in, or he was too angry...or he just had no idea where this road went and was simply hoping to intimidate them.

The cars purred on, down into the valley, under the canopy of huge old oaks, roots sunk deep into the rich earth. Their doors brushed the rampant growth of hedge parsley and ferns. Birds fluttered overhead and a rare pine marten trotted across the road. A field opened beside them, brilliant and fragrant with native wildflowers, hovered over by butterflies. A hawk hovered high up. Behind the woods and fields the land hunched into soft green hills dreaming in the spring sun and the rocky outcropping that rose above the quarry.

‘Beautiful,’ Sam said.

'Too good for the likes of Justin Roberts,' Vanimöré agreed.

'Who is he, anyhow, Mr. Steele? I've never seen him before.'

'I doubt you would have. He is trying to get in with Ronnie Trent; might have been sent here to learn what he can — though I doubt it; he's completely useless — or maybe he's come of his own volition, to see if he can take back some information. He's a rapist, a snake, an abuser, arrogant and a cowardly bully. Dreams of having his own little crime family.'

'What are you going to do to him?' Sam asked.

'Me? Nothing. Perish the thought.'

Sam looked at him curiously, clearly not believing him. Vanimöré smiled without humour. 'He has hurt people I care about.' Not in this world but he had, here, hurt people in exactly the same way. That Vanimöré had not known them mattered nothing. They were people. That was enough.

They crossed an old stone bridge over a stream — slowly, as it was narrower even than the road. Justin, though his vehicle was smaller, was even more cautious.

'Doesn't want to damage his paintwork,' Vanimöré murmured, as he gradually increased his speed. The road snaked, its edges febrile with potholes, corners made blind by vegetation, and he thought that Justin might have stopped then, save there was nowhere to turn and Leon was right behind him.

Yes, come, do not give up now, Vanimöré thought, with a mental push into a mind more like an orc's than a Mortal's. He smothered the desire to spit the rank taste out of his mouth. And at that moment Leon sounded his horn as if getting impatient. Vanimöré could hear Justin's yelled: 'Fuck you!'

Vanimöré slowly pulled away from the crawling McLaren as the road curved again and then rose toward a rocky outcropping. The ground began to drop away, and the ascent lifted more sharply. They came out from the trees in a swooping climb, the hill on their left, the ground falling ever more steeply on their right with a narrow border of mossy grass and a few leaning posts the only barrier against the drop.

Sam gulped. 'Not sure I'll ever get used to this!'

Vanimöré did not answer, glanced in his rear-view mirror and saw the McLaren come out from the trees, going faster now. Vanimöré accelerated up the curving incline. The grass verge grew broader, giving an illusion of safety now one could not see the drop, and the McLaren surged forward. But they had not reached the quarry, yet.

The road curved and now, quite suddenly, one could see the quarry, the steep-hewn sides dropping into still, green water. The Bentley tore alongside it and then Vanimöré braked, backed and stopped the car directly across the road.

'This,' he said softly. 'Is where we see—' he glanced at Sam. 'Who — blinks — first.'

The McLaren flew into view with a squeal of tyres, and Vanimöré, watching, saw the horror explode on Justin's face. There was no time to break, and if he collided with the Bentley, the McLaren would come off much the worse; it might even be fatal to the driver. There was no room to pass, not really, just the hope of it.

Justin wrenched on the steering wheel, mouth open, eyes wide. The car screamed past the Bentley

with an inch to spare — off the road. Over the edge.

Vanimöre got out of the car as the McLaren's rear tyres left the road, and as the Lotus pulled in. Leon jumped out. It almost seemed, for a moment, as if the McLaren's speed would take it across the quarry...and then, gravity exerted its inescapable hold, and the car dropped. There was a splash that echoed off the walls, reverberating, and the McLaren slowly sank, leaving silence in the froth of its wake.

'Think he'll get out, Mr. Steele?' Leon asked as Sam came to Vanimöre's side and looked down.

Vanimöre shrugged. 'Perhaps we should wait and see.'

Leon drew his gun. 'I think we should.'

Vanimöre sank down, crossing his legs. 'I have to see the body,' he said, remembering the Justin of another world. 'To check for...jewellery.'

'Should I organise divers, Mr. Steele?'

'No need. I can deal with it.'

The silence seeped back. The water stilled. Somewhere overhead, a raven croaked; black wings shirred the face of the sun.

OooOooO

Chapter End Notes

Justin Roberts appears in Verhalen's Northern Lights as an abuser of Sören.

The conversations with Eru are in Magnificat of the Damned IV: Chapter 11

<http://www.fairie-archive.com/viewstory.php?sid=1906&textsize=0&chapter=11>

~ Fragment ~

~ Fragment ~

~ Vanimöré straightened the Bentley, examined the road for tyre marks and scuffed out the few betraying signs of churned earth and gravel.

'I don't think we need to get Howard involved in this,' he said. 'Leon, call the police, if you would. I do not want that refuse polluting the water.'

'He went over the edge, driving without due care and attention,' Leon agreed, reaching for his phone. 'Tailgating you for no reason.'

'Most unfortunate,' Vanimöré murmured. 'But he followed us from the Yew Tree for no apparent reason, driving recklessly and aggressively, yes. Accidents happen. Cars have gone over the edge of this quarry before. It's the reason I closed the road.'

'So why did we come this way, Mr. Steele?'

'I thought he would take heed of the sign "Private Road" sign,' Vanimöré shrugged. 'As most er...law abiding people do. Clearly he did not.'

'But what would a member of MI6 be doing here?' Sam asked pertinently, dragging his eyes away from the still water and turning them on Leon.

'Most of the field operatives are also technically employed by Apollyon Enterprises,' Leon told him. 'It's our cover if needed. Officially, I'm the Financial Advisor for Crennen Life, which is a charity funded by Mr. Steele. Halfway houses for street kids, runaways, where they can learn to live again, get help for addictions and trauma and be helped into work.'

'That's amazing,' Sam said, turning to look at Vanimöré and smiling warmly.

'So, sometimes, I visit Mr. Steele at Summerland, especially if I'm down in the south-west, and I have all the documents to prove it. If it becomes necessary, I will have to show them my true I.D. But I doubt it will.'

'You also have a gun,' Vanimöré pointed out. 'Give it to me. I'll hide it until the brouhaha is over.' He began to strip. 'I'll see what's on the body.'

'Surely it's too dangerous,' Sam exclaimed. 'You don't know what's down there.'

'A McLaren and a corpse,' Vanimöré said, flippant. 'I do know, in fact. I had it dredged a few years ago; people had been using it for fly tipping and I wanted it to become a natural lake. But I'll be careful.'

Sam averted his eyes as Vanimörel took off the remainder of his clothes. With his hair appearing short, the tattoos that ran up his arms would be visible as they curled over his shoulders and down in a V shape to his rear. This side of Dagor Dagorath, the Red Eye brand on the base of his spine was gone. Not that it signified. Brands on the soul never faded.

He reached into the boot of the Bentley for a First Aid kit. Taking out a pair of thin gloves, he put them on, secured them with duck tape around the wrists, and walked to the edge of the quarry. After a quick glance, he lowered himself, finding hand and footholds until he was at the water's edge, then letting himself in without a splash.

The water was not entirely opaque, but the car had settled at the bottom, about thirty feet down, where the light from above was more dim. With its windows open, the interior of the car had filled quickly and Justin had been unable to extricate himself from the seat belt. What a tragedy. Justin's eyes bulged, his mouth hung open; fecal matter stained the water, his body voiding itself either just before or after death. Appropriate. Vanimörel found a gold necklace and thick gold bracelet on the body, but had not expected to find a ring; Justin had worn only one signet on a little finger.

His wallet, however, contained something that did cause Vanimörel a moment's surprise. Slotted into one of the pockets was a small round mirror backed by gold. Vanimörel placed the wallet between his teeth, and swam to the surface. Leon and Sam waited in tense silence as he shinned up the rock and onto the road, shaking water from his hair. Sam said relievedly: 'Thank god. You were down there ages.'

'I don't drown easily, Samael.' Still wearing the gloves, Vanimörel flicked through the wallet. There were several credit cards, business cards, which he handed to Leon and, beside the mirror, a thick wad of fifty pound notes, which he took. There were plenty of charities who would be happy to have this; it might be the only decent thing Justin Roberts (or rather his money) had ever done. He pitched the wallet over into the quarry where it floated, and dried himself with a towel from the car.

'Hmm,' Leon said, handing over a card. It was thick, expensive, deckle-edged, a name written in flowing dark gold script.

Arthur May

Antiques

19a Charlestown Way, St. Austell.

'Well,' Leon said. It seems there is a connection between Justin Roberts and Ronnie Trent, but perhaps only a vague one: Arcadia Holdings.'

'Arthur May,' Vanimörel repeated. 'Antiques.' He drew on his shorts and jeans.

'Howard checked out the consortium that owns Arcadia. May is legitimate,' Leon said noncommittally. 'Respected. Unusual that his shop is in Cornwall not London, but St. Austell gets a lot of tourists and they like to spend money.'

‘St. Austell?’ Vanimöré interrupted, and turned to Sam. ‘You said that your mother and Madge were going down there Saturday. By train?’

‘Yes,’ Sam nodded. ‘John will need the car.’

‘We’ll take them down,’ Vanimöré decided. ‘I think I’d like to check on Mr. Arthur May’s antique shop.’

OooOooO

‘Ah, Mr. Steele, you do realise it was very dangerous to dive into that.’ The policemen looked a little uncomfortable but determined to do his job. A police helicopter throbbed overhead.

‘I’m quite a good swimmer,’ Vanimöré replied calmly. ‘I went in carefully. And if there was a chance...’

‘Commendable, but it would have been very quick. Now, you say he was in the Yew Tree—’

‘He was. He insulted my employees as we were having lunch, and became aggressive, then followed me when we left.’

‘And you came up here because...?’

‘He was tailgating me; I thought, as this road is private, he would just lose interest, the irritating little shit.’ Vanimöré was not inclined to feign sympathy for Justin Roberts. ‘God knows who he was or what his problem was.’

‘We’re checking into it, Mr. Steele.’ One of the police divers surfaced. ‘An unpleasant experience, I’m afraid.’

‘Very. He was going much too fast. I’ll have to get this road entirely closed off, I think.’

‘Yes, that would be a good thing. There’ll be an autopsy; he may have been drinking, or drug driving. We’ll talk to the staff at the inn. And...’ Doggedly, ‘I have to ask if you were drinking, sir. I hope you understand.’

‘I was not, nor was Mr. St. Cloud, but we’ll happily take a breathalyser.’

The results showed them with only the normal trace alcohol in their blood, and Vanimöré could feel the relief. The local police force really did not want to become involved in any kind of scandal surrounding the local multi-billionaire, who was known to be a philanthropist and did much good for the area.

‘Well, if you’re at Summerland, sir, and your employees —’

‘By all means.’ Vanimöré went to the Bentley. ‘We have business in St. Austell on Saturday for a few days, but we’re not leaving the country,’ he added dryly. ‘If you’ll excuse me, I think I’d like to go home and shower.’

‘Of course, Mr. Steele.’

They drove the long way back to Summerland, dropping Sam off at Southview to talk to Madge and his mother about the change in plans. Vanimöré showered and changed. Towelling his hair, he came downstairs to find Leon in the study; he was on the phone, and with an apologetic grimace handed it to Vanimöré.

‘Howard, how are you?’

‘Another one, Steele? *Another* one? You wouldn’t like to give me a guesstimate of the final body count here, would you?’

Vanimöré tutted soothingly. ‘Justin Roberts was just a very unfortunate accident.’

‘Of course he was,’ Howard grated. ‘Not that anyone except his arsehole of a father’s going to weep for him, but I do not want a cluster of deaths around Summerland...Oh! Guess what?! I already do.’

Vanimöré winked at Leon. ‘Don’t worry. The police will no doubt ask some questions, but the only odd aspect of this is what Justin Roberts was actually doing down here.’ He slid the mirror from his pocket and tilted it. ‘I’m wondering if he was anything to do with Ronnie Trent at all.’

‘Oh, he’s been sleazing around Ronnie Trent, alright,’ Howard responded. ‘There’s some CCTV footage of him going into the Ritz, and staff remember him approaching Ronnie. He had some balls, that I will say, or was on something more likely. Didn’t stay long, and Ronnie wasn’t welcoming, but—’

‘I want to know when Ronnie next goes to Rochford Manor,’ Vanimöré said crisply. ‘Anything else?’

‘Yes, Arthur May, antiques dealer. Well, he’s legit, but here’s the thing: he’s known, in certain circles, to deal in antiques that a lot of people are chary of touching: Esoterica, arcana, so-called ‘cursed’ objects, black magic paraphernalia. There’s always buyers for that kind of thing. Weirdos,’ he added and Van swallowed a laugh. ‘So, it’s said he can, privately, source them or track them down. No auctions, no publicity. Very discreet. It’s not, strictly-speaking illegal, either.’

‘Hmm,’ Vanimöré murmured.

‘So, maybe the cellar work in Rochford was to store or keep, or find something?’

‘One of those three, Howard, I have no doubt.’

‘Sod you, Steele.’

‘Been done, Howard.’

The phone went dead. Vanimöré laughed at Leon’s expression, who said, ‘You think Arthur May is Sauron.’ His voice was flat.

‘Possibly.’

‘And if he is?’

‘That is the wrong question, Leon. The question is: What is in Rochford Manor that he wants?’

Leon paled slightly. ‘I never saw the cellars, as I told you,’ he said. ‘But Roland didn’t have anything valuable, I’m sure. He..wasn’t the kind of person who could keep secrets; he’d get very excited and enthusiastic.’ He considered, said slowly, ‘Perhaps he didn’t *know* he had anything that was valuable.’ Then: ‘The Manor could be booked, Mr. Steele, by you, by Apollyon Enterprises; we’d have plenty of time then, to find out of there’s anything there.’ His incredibly blue eyes blazed with excitement.

‘Slow down,’ Vanimöré laughed. ‘That will certainly be done, but there is still Ronnie Trent. I have an *intense* dislike of rapists, Leon. No-one deserves to be raped, no-one *asks for it*, and *no-one* deserves to be sold for sex.’ Whatever his reservations of Samael (and he knew well enough that Elgalad was willing to put himself in danger, to be hurt) the part of Vanimöré that had been a boy raped by Melkor, a young man betrayed and abused by his own father, refused to let it lie. And Ronnie Trent and his men had raped many others, were using trafficked youngsters. There *would* be a reckoning.

Is that an excuse, Vanimöré? Or is the unknowable Elgalad-Eru wagering on some lingering taste of love, and thine own need to protect?

‘Of course not, Mr. Steele,’ Leon said soberly, loosing Vanimöré from his somber speculation. ‘I didn’t mean we should forget Trent or what he’s done. I’m sorry, I’m just...’ He shook his head.

‘I understand, Leon. But first, St. Austell,’ Vanimöré said. ‘And now — some champagne?’

OooOooO

‘It’s so beautiful here,’ Leon commented from his relaxed position in the sun lounger with its view over the gardens to the sea.

‘Yes,’ Vanimöré agreed. ‘You have a flat in Belgravia, I understand?’

‘I’m very rich,’ Leon said unapologetically, stating a simple fact. ‘My grandfather left me an inheritance, and I’m my parents’ only heir. Not that I think anything will happen to them for a long time, and I hope it doesn’t.’ He took a sip of champagne. ‘But it’s not enough, wealth. It never was. I never even thought about being rich growing up. It put me in Eton, yes, where at least I ate better than at home. But when I was *at* home, it never felt as if I was spoiled.’ He glanced at Vanimöré, who nodded. ‘That huge mansion, my parents living and breathing their horses, no holidays...I knew we were rich of course, but it never felt like it. Sometimes I think they forgot I was even there during the holidays, which was why I loved the summer, staying at Rochford. And when I got older and came into my inheritance and knew I could do anything, live the life of a playboy, buy a yacht, do nothing all my life if I wanted...it just didn’t attract me. I wanted more.’

‘No, Leon, wealth is never enough. But one rarely finds a wealthy man, or woman, who will admit that.’

‘I wanted to buy Rochford from Roland. I didn’t expect him to bequeath it to me, but I loved it there. I just never got that chance.’ Leon straightened the recliner, sat up. ‘I should have made more of an effort to talk to him, but —’

‘If you had got in the way, Thuringwethil would have killed you,’ Vanimöré told him bluntly. ‘She had what she wanted and she — and Sauron — were determined that nothing and no-one would get in their way. Trust me on this.’

Leon looked at him, grimaced. ‘You’re right of course. I just can’t stand the thought of him being there with her, her battenning on him like some succubus, with him getting weaker and weaker, not understanding what was happening, and no-one knowing, no-one doing anything to help...’

He got up, walked away a few paces. Vanimöré gave him a moment and said quietly: ‘I know. I do know. Hindsight is a curse, and so is the imagination.’

A nod of the glossy black head, then Leon seemed to force himself to relax. He turned. ‘The mirror you found on Robert’s body,’ he began. ‘Is it...relevant? I wouldn’t have thought he was the kind of man who’d use one, vain enough to forever be checking his appearance in a mirror, yes, but not to carry one.’

‘I agree. It’s certainly unexpected.’ He surveyed Leon for a full minute and watched the colour come up in the high cheekbones, though that blue-eyed gaze did not waver.

‘I have a great deal of faith in Howard’s judgement of those he employs,’ he said. ‘But I am sure he has told you that there is a great deal he does not know about me.’

‘Yes,’ Leon replied emphatically. And with a somewhat hollow laugh: ‘Oh, yes indeed.’

‘And Howard prefers it that way,’ Vanimöré continued. Howard’s exact words had been: ‘Let’s just say that I accept everything, Mr. Steele, but I can operate better the less I *think* about this paranormal bullshit.’

Howard had never seen Vanimöré without glamour, and Vanimöré knew he did not wish to. He excelled in ‘fixing’ the problems the department might run into, smoothing the way, dancing with other intelligence agencies; it kept him grounded, he said.

‘But with the field operatives, it has to be a little different. They may *have* to see things that they cannot explain that, perhaps, only quantum physics can offer explanations for. And so, I always ask those operatives: How much are you willing to believe, or at least accept as possible?’

‘I did see you, and the others...’ Leon gestured, tossed the heavy swathe of hair from his forehead. ‘As you really appear. I saw you walk into a portal to...somewhere...and vanish, and then come back.’

‘And are you not already questioning what you saw?’ Vanimöré smiled faintly. ‘The brain of a Mortal is interesting. When it sees something that does not fit into what it believes is real and possible, it works extraordinarily hard to blank it out. It could not have happened, and therefore it did not.’

Leon had been frowning. At these words, his brow relaxed and he smiled. ‘Well, Mr. Steele, you’re right on the mark, yes, but they do try to train us not to do that, to observe without gullibility, but also without judgement.’

‘A thing which very few can do. But when I tell you or show you something, I would like you to believe it. It’s so much simpler.’ He drew out the mirror. ‘Long ago, before the creation of this universe, there was another.’ (And another, before than one?) ‘Yes, there have been and are others.’

In that universe, a Mirror was created, meant to copy the Great Portal in the Timeless Halls, which are beyond space and time. The maker was a master, the most brilliant mind the universe had known, and more than that. Much more...When that universe was destroyed, the shockwave — as you might call it — nudged the Mirror away from the Timeless Halls until it came to rest in one of the new universes. There, it was shattered, pieces of it scattering across every reality. And sometimes, those pieces are found. Most of the time, they look like ordinary mirrors, some large, some small, pieces set into a mosaic, a box, shards found on an empty beach...Most of the time they behave exactly like an ordinary mirror and sometimes—‘ He placed the mirror in Leon’s hand. ‘They show glimpses of other realities, other times.’ The blue eyes flew up to meet his. ‘For certain people,’ he said. ‘they can also act as Portals.’

‘O-Kay,’ Leon said. ‘A universe that was destroyed, new universes. Portals into different worlds...Go big or go home.’

‘Pretty much,’ Vanimöré gleamed.

‘Should I...look in it?’ Leon asked.

‘It’s not going to explode,’ Vanimöré said patiently. ‘Or pull you into a different reality...Probably,’ he added, at which Leon’s hand jerked.

‘Nothing,’ he said after a moment, sounding almost disappointed.

‘Most of the time there will be nothing. I don’t imagine Justin Roberts saw anything, either. But it does beg the question: where did he find it, buy it, or who gave it to him?’

‘Sauron?’ Leon looked sceptical. ‘Okay, I don’t *know* Sauron, and honestly find it very hard to believe...sorry Mr. Steele,’ as Vanimöré raised a brow, ‘but my guess is he would think Justin Roberts as so much dog shite on his shoe.’

‘Believe me, he has made use of far worse people than Roberts.’ Vanimöré remembered Malantur, the Mouth of Sauron, and the Nazgûl. But his highest servants did possess intelligence, twisted though it was. ‘You are right though, orcs are not noted for cleverness, and Roberts was little more than an orc; so if Sauron did give it to Roberts, there is a reason behind it. And so...’ He considered a moment. ‘The McLaren had no dash cam. Not surprising. Roberts would not want to record the way he drove; it’s usually careful drivers who have them. We can look into his credit card expenditure though, mileage, phone usage...Get Howard onto it.’

‘I already did, Mr. Steele.’ he handed the mirror back.

‘Very good, then let us relax.’

Early evening light came down soft and gold as melted butter over land and sea, birds called drowsily, and the pines whispered like the sighs of lovers in the night.

‘Can I ask, Mr. Steele,’ Leon said after a long time. ‘Howard’s married, but you want the field operatives to be single.’

‘Howard was married before he became head of the department,’ Vanimöré said. ‘But yes, partners, especially married, are a liability. *You* can look after yourself, but can they? They could too easily be used against you, held hostage, killed.’ He smiled coldly. ‘I don’t expect the field operatives to be monks, Leon, or nuns, but when you love someone, you are vulnerable, and I do not trust any man or woman not to buckle at the crucial moment. There is no-one who cannot be broken, one way or another.’

Leon sat up, looked at him. ‘That was explained to us,’ he acknowledged. ‘And yes, I’m single, at the moment.’

‘Lovers, I care nothing about,’ Vanimöré said easily. ‘Just be aware that, as Francis Bacon said: *“He that hath wife and children hath given hostages to fortune; for they are impediments to great enterprises, either of virtue or mischief.”*’

‘Or in your case, it may be a husband and adopted children. But either way, he was correct.’

‘Is that why you have no-one, Mr. Steele?’ And then he stopped. ‘That was unforgivable. Sorry.’

‘I am not easily attracted to anyone.’ *And thou art quite correct. I do have no-one, and perhaps that is how it has to be. Lovers now and then is about all I can ever expect.* ‘But when I exist on physical worlds, I am very careful.’

The blue eyes met his. ‘Howard said, and I quote: He is a cold bastard.’

Vanimöré laughed. ‘He does not know the half of it. Is this — circuitously — coming back to Samael, again?’

‘He never takes his eyes off you. Especially when you...took your clothes off up at the quarry.’

‘Although the circumstance was appalling, he has seen men naked before, as have you, I am sure.’

‘Ah, yes...not quite like you though.’ Leon put a hand over his eyes and laughed.

‘Samael watches you as well. Listen: he’s trying to find his feet. He is possibly attracted to men, possibly men and women, although I find it more likely that he simply has had no opportunity to discover what he wants. His life has changed immeasurably in a few days.’

‘Point taken, Mr. Steele, but if he *is* bait, a trap, whatever, I can’t think of a single thing any tin-pot so-called crime boss could offer him that *you* could not better.’

‘Very well,’ Vanimöré said. ‘But his mind is exactly what I would expect of a victim: outrage, shame, guilt.’ So either Samael was exactly what he presented himself as, or he was indeed simply a disguise. *Hells, I do not want to think about it. Like Howard I operate better by ignoring certain things. And I do not want to become distracted.*

‘His mind?’

Vanimöré nodded.

‘My apologies then. It’s just my instincts...’

Vanimöré watched him. ‘You do not like him because he comes from a poor background, Leon?’

‘It’s not that, Mr. Steele,’ Leon refuted quickly. ‘I’m really not as much of a snob as you think. I didn’t say I didn’t like him either. I’m trying to do my job.’

‘Never ignore your instincts,’ Vanimöré told him. ‘You may be right, although not for the reasons you think. In any event. Let me handle Samael. And no, I am not going to seduce a young man who has recently been raped; even if he is working for someone else, he is still vulnerable. I do have a certain code, Leon St. Cloud.’

There was a little silence. Leon inclined his head. ‘Howard said that, too.’

For most people. For some, none at all. He picked up the mirror almost idly. He knew the power of portals, where they could lead, what they could show. And Fëanor's Great mirror...

Leaf shadows darkened the glass surface to old silver. Vanimörel angled it.

...Palaces made out of light, gardens that spanned a continent. Gods who wove the essence of the universe into beauty and wore stars in their hair. Music, passion, love. Protection.

And his own voice, like a touch out of the dark: 'He loves thee like an obsession, like a part of him; he wants nothing to harm thee, nothing to touch thee. But that is not living. It is not life.'

Unfathomable, rain-clear eyes beginning to darken, shadows in their depths.

Nothing is ever ended...

Nothing is forgotten.

OooOooO

~ Stars, and Shadows ~

~ Stars and Shadows ~

~ That night Vanimöré dreamt again, not of the ancient universe, if that as what it was (and he was withholding judgement until more was revealed) but a series of vignettes, as it were. He saw Maglor walking through the history of this world: ancient Sumer, Akkadia, the first great Empire, Macedonia, Persia, Babylon, the land of the Hittites, Egypt, Israel under the rule of Solomon, China, India, Greece, Rome, northward through Europe to Britannia with deep forests and haunted mists. Moving, always moving, unable to stay anywhere too long at a time when people grew old quickly and died of many ills.

He crossed and recrossed Europe, Russia, traveled southward, sailing the Mediterranean to Africa. Always glamoured, so rarely finding friendship, but always leaving behind a memory of a tall and beautiful man whose voice could have sung the sunrise into being. And, often, he left behind far more than that: his knowledge of mathematics, of physics, of science was so far advanced that a conversation with another intelligent mind left seeds that flowered and grew into architecture, thought, music, art. One could look into history and see Maglor's brilliance, drawn and inherited from Fëanor, encoded in the standing stones of Europe, the wonders of Egypt, in cities long gone to ruin like Persepolis and Angkor Wat, inscribed on clay tablets and carefully preserved parchment, written in musical notes, in law, displayed on an ancient canvas, in the records of great battles...

And, following on his heels, sometimes only by years, another like him, almost his twin in appearance but for the gleaming bronze of his hair. The same bright brilliance, the same facility with mathematics, music, science, sometimes adding to or confirming his father's original ideas. Whether by accident or design their paths almost — but never quite — crossed.

Vanimöré sat up in the dove-coloured dawn. Tindómion was alive in this world? And then, he thought, why not? There was a tragic kind of poetry in it, after all. It was not something he had considered before, accustomed to thinking of Maglor as the wandering one. The one left behind. And this world, he had spent little time in; enough to sow the seeds of his wealth for use, little more. There were many worlds where he had done that and little more, waiting...

But was Tindómion still alive now? He reached out with all his senses — harder to do here, with the greater part of his power left behind, but no great effort. He always knew Maglor was alive, in any world; there was a link between them, and Tindómion — they had been lovers, though only twice, the same baiting and passion and almost-hate and fire. Not in this world, although Tindómion had been there when Vanimöré died in Barad-dûr.

He dressed quickly, went through the house where only the ticking of a clock broke the early-morning silence and into the shadowy pines, and the barrow.

It was always strange, returning to the Monument and his true power; there was a sense of completion — and terrible loneliness. Did Eru feel this, he wondered, resisting the urge to *look* at

Samael. It would be a pointless exercise; he would present exactly as he purported, even if he was masquerading. Eru-Elgalad could hide himself and would until he no longer wished to. Vanimöre tossed the thought aside, concentrated on Tindómion...and...

...Yes.

OooOooO

‘I want thee to go and find Maglor,’ he told Edenel and then, gently: ‘Tindómion is also here, on this world.’

Edenel's white eyes burned cold as ice is cold. ‘Here,’ he repeated. Then: ‘How? Why? I...have not looked, or not further than Maglor. Tell me.’

‘I went to the Monument where things are...clearer,’ Vanimöre said. ‘He refused to go into the West, to Valinor, until he had found his father. And so...’ He spread his hand. ‘And never found him, but oh, so close, sometimes. It is time. I will do anything I can, Edenel, to correct things here.’

‘Where is Tindómion, now?’

‘At the moment, in London. He travels. Like Maglor — and myself — he is independently wealthy from good investments. Every few years, he walks the coast of the UK. He still hopes he might find his father near the sea, although it has become more of a ritual with him, not a belief.’

They looked at one another, unable to express the bleakness of such an existence, both for father or son. Edenel reached out, placed a hand on Vanimöre's.

‘Shall I tell him? Does he even know he has a son?’

‘No. At least, not consciously. And Tindómion was not engendered in the same way, here.’

‘How, then?’

‘It was the same woman,’ Vanimöre said. ‘Fanari Pendlodiel, but this time it was almost consensual on his part and certainly on hers. He went to Vinyamar when Turgon dwelt there, confused, always *always* grieving for his father, and Fingolfin (yes they were lovers here, too) was not in attendance. He was trying to see if he could love a woman as he loved his father and Fingolfin. Fanari he knew from years before and they were friends. He did not regret the experience, but it proved to him that his preference was for men. As for Fanari, she did not regret it either. They were together just once, not long before Turgon removed to Gondolin. It was known he was leaving (by a few) but not where, and certainly he did not tell the Fëanorions, though others made them privy to the fact, including Fingolfin and Glorfindel and Fanari, too. She told Maglor she knew that their moment together was merely that, and experience, nothing more, and went to Gondolin. In fact, she did not want to marry a man who would not love her and would not put chains around Maglor's neck when the far heavier chains of the Oath already bound him. Quite apart from that, she herself preferred women. Maglor was something of an outlier, just as Fanari was for him.

‘In Gondolin, she bore Tindómion but, due to Turgon's laws, she could never tell Maglor.

Tindómion became a warrior, a poet, deeply loved by Glorfindel and Ecthelion but (again) with Turgon's laws, their relationship was kept secret. When Glorfindel died at Christhorn, Tindómion took charge of the refugees.'

'And at the Tears, or later, when the Gondolindrim refugees came to the Havens of Sirion, did he not seek out his father?' Edanel asked. 'Surely he knew he was Maglor's son.'

'Oh, Fanari made no secret of it, and it would have been impossible to hide anyhow, as he grew: that hair, that face, those eyes.' Vanimöreló smiled. 'It irked Turgon greatly that the very image of one of the Kinslayers should walk abroad in his city, the grandson of Penlod no less! There were very few in Gondolin who looked on the Fëanorions favourably. Turgon never forgave them for his wife's death, and many others had lost family, friends, husbands or wives crossing the Helcaraxë.' Edanel nodded.

'Glorfindel and Ecthelion, however — well, if they were not pro-Fëanorion, there was a history there, and they refused to speak ill of them, which was one of the reasons they took Tindómion under their wing when he was young. He was bullied, or, rather, people *tried* to bully him. He learned to defend himself very quickly and once he was tutored in the warrior arts there were few who could match him in Gondolin or beyond. He tried not to let the hatred against the Fëanorions affect him and, from Glorfindel especially, he learned the truth about them: Brilliant, fiery, flawed, but not mad, evil.' Vanimöreló paused with a reminiscent smile. 'Tindómion could very well have turned against his father's blood, but it seems that, even then, the bond was too great. In fact the more people spoke against the Fëanorions, the more he was inclined to take their part, to seek to understand why they had acted as they did, even to defend them.'

Edanel smiled back. 'The love between them seems to be one of the absolutes of any universe, yes.'

'Say, "between us," Edanel,' Vanimöreló corrected. 'For thou art as much a part of them as any.'

The beautiful white eyes blinked. A wave of love and sorrow as deep as Vanimöreló's own streamed from him. But he said, steadily: 'And so art thou.'

Vanimöreló smiled faded. He looked away, shook his head infinitesimally. After a moment he continued with the tale.

'Tindómion did heed his mother's words to him: that Maglor did not desire a woman, wife or marriage and Tindómion wondered if he would even acknowledge a son, though Glorfindel assured him he would. After Gondolin he thought, perhaps, that Maglor might learn of him and send him a message. He was as proud as all that family and loath to be the one to make the first move. But I also believe, from what I saw, that he *would* have presented himself to the Fëanorions and joined them, if not as a son, as a warrior. But events were to prevent that — in this world, anyhow.'

'The Tears,' Edanel said, then. 'Did he not see his father there? No, they were too Far East. We *Ithiledhil* were also eastward.'

'The battle separated them,' Vanimöreló agreed. 'Just as it did Maedhros and Fingon, and Tindómion was fighting with Glorfindel's House. Turgon decreed,' with a sneer. 'That a "base-born son" could not form his own house in Gondolin. He would in no wise have deserted his duties in battle, however much he might have wanted to.'

'*Last Star of the House of Fëanor*,' Edanel murmured, lights of white anger in his eyes so that they shone like lamps. 'Oh, base-born indeed.'

'And he thought there would be time. Even Turgon believed the Tears would be won. As it was.'

He spread his hands eloquently, and Edenel said softly: 'I remember, yes.' He gathered their cups and went to the coffee machine.

'Thou didst have doubts?' Vanimörel asked him, and Edenel went still.
'I had seen Utumno.'

Vanimörel exhaled. 'Yes, my dear.'

'But go on.' The machine ground fresh beans and the aromatic scent filled the room.

'Gil-galad came to the Havens soon after the Gondolindrim arrived and were settling.' Vanimörel sipped the fresh cup. 'And that was where Tindömion met him. There was the same instant spark, the same passion. Almost immediately, despite opposition, he made Tindömion one of his knight-companions. He was a proven warrior, had survived the Nirnaeth Arnoediad and Gondolin. Like Maglor, he slew a Balrog.' He lifted his eyes. 'In fact, it was Coldagnir he slew.'

Edenel was startled. 'Was it, by the Hells?'

Vanimörel nodded slowly. 'Coldagnir's tale is a little different here; he decided of his own volition to challenge Melkor and was...debased. His spirit is trapped in the Void.'

Edenel raised his brows. 'I see.'

'I shall have to do something about that, later. To go on: When the Fëanorions attacked the Havens, Tindömion and his mother were on Balar and after that, Tindömion was in a difficult situation.'

'He would be,' Edenel acknowledged, looking into his cup. 'Yes, how could he contact Maglor without it being said that he supported his actions?'

'It goes without saying he did not,' Vanimörel replied. 'But he did hold to the belief, as did Gil-galad, that the Silmaril Elwing held was the Fëanorions by right, and she should have relinquished it. Anyhow, he held off, and then came the War of Wrath, which he fought in, and came closer to Maglor than he ever would. When the rumour went up that Maedhros and Maglor had escaped, he tried to follow them. He was almost mad in his desire and it took a great many warriors to hold him back. One of them, who had ever been jealous of him, knocked him out. After, it was too late. Gil-galad, who had not been there, understood, and allowed him to seek Maglor but Tindömion never found him.'

The clock ticked. *Time was...Time is...Time is past.*

Time is past...

Time is past...

Edenel laid his hands flat on the table.

'And after?'

Vanimörel roused himself from the grief. 'After, in Lindon, Tindömion and Gil-galad still had to endure much the same as in our world,' Vanimörel said. 'Gil-galad died by Sauron's hand, breaking Tindömion's heart, driving him mad; he went to Imladris with Glorfindel but refused ever to seek Valinor. Even after the War of the Ring, he would not go. He said if it took him until the Dagor Dagorath he would find his father.'

‘And we know the weight of a Fëanorian vow,’ Edanel murmured. Vanimörelé thought, *Yes, we do indeed*. Had Edanel, then Élernil, not set the foundation for all such vows in the Underworld, in horror and pain and resistance?

‘We know it, yes,’ he said quietly. ‘The others did sail to Valainor, even Glorfindel because he would not desert Elrond or, more especially, Elladan and Elrohir. And perhaps he thought things could be changed, that he could help change them. And Glorfindel,’ Vanimörelé said flatly to hide, for the moment, his rage. ‘Elladan and Elrohir were executed by the Valar for the unnatural lusts they would not do penance for. Fanari was likewise killed. They reside now in the Halls of Mandos. The only Elves living on Valinor are those who worship the Valar and live lives of contemplation and chastity. There are not so many.’

Edanel rose to his feet like a whip. ‘Monstrous,’ he said and the ice in his voice could have cracked iron to its core, made the room suddenly cold, as if the door had been opened onto an age of ice. ‘So what will we do?’

‘We bring Maglor and Tindómion together and we go to Valinor and release the dead.’ Vanimörelé said it simply.

Edanel reached out and their hands clasped. ‘And dethrone the Valar.’

‘Of course,’ Vanimörelé said. ‘It will be a pleasure, for all of us.’

‘And then what wilt thou do?’ Edanel wondered, eyes searching his face.

‘There are infinite worlds, Edanel. There will always be something to do.’ Running away from the unbearable. From Oblivion — or to it? He cupped Edanel’s chin in his hand. ‘First true king of the Noldor. King of Winter,’ he whispered. ‘Survivor. I thank thee for coming here.’

‘Wherever my kin are, alive or dead and trapped, my place is there. And with thee, too.’ His own hand mirrored Vanimörelé’s gesture. They looked into one another’s eyes.

‘I lost them,’ Vanimörelé said and the terrible pain opened at his heart. ‘I lost them.’

‘Not forever,’ Edanel kissed him with the burn of the coldest ice. ‘Not forever’

‘I would have to unmake Time itself. But now, I wish thee to go to Maglor.’

Now?’ Edanel asked.

‘Yes.’

‘And tell him everything?’

‘Yes, everything. He is Fëanor’s son; his mind can encompass it, and it will give him hope to know that — in another universe — his family, all the dead live again and as gods. And they will again, here. Ensure he knows that; it is *my* vow, in *this* world.’

Edanel pushed his fingers into Vanimörelé’s hair. To a god’s eyes, it would not appear short, and he felt the gentle tug far beyond what the human eye would see.

‘I will tell him, and more about thee than thou wouldst.’

'I am not certain that would make any difference,' Vanimöre said wryly. 'The Vanimöre of this world has earned his hate, although there was something there that was not utterly selfish. Yet he was a complete fool to follow and serve his father. Weak, or wicked or both. I am glad Glorfindel slew him.'

'Everything that can happen,' EdeneI recited, 'has happened. Even myself serving Melkor, just as I have also been the father of Fëanor and Fingolfin.'

'I know,' Vanimöre said. 'And now go, find thy kinsman.'

'Thine, too.'

'Mine too, and there is no greater love, no greater hate, than that between kin.'

OooOooO

St. Austell lay under a great stream of grey cloud trailing up from the Azores; the air was warm, humid.

After seeing the ladies into their hotel, Vanimöre booked Leon, Sam and himself into a smaller, very exclusive establishment in the town. They had dinner there, then walked into the town. It was not yet the summer season, but was still quite busy, the good weather having drawn retirees down to Cornwall to enjoy it. They walked down Charlestown Road, which lead to the harbour and was mainly residential, but there were a few old houses converted into galleries and shops, and Arthur May's was one of them; a charming old redbrick place garlanded with ancient wisteria. Vanimöre hid a wry smile on seeing it, but it meant nothing really. Yet he and his father had the same tastes in certain things.

'Keep out of view of the camera,' he murmured as they crossed on the opposite side of the street. 'At least for now.' They were casually dressed, baseball caps pulled down, sunglasses on, but the camera was no grainy CCTV but a 'Ring' doorbell set at head-height.

The windows were old, many-paned bows, showing just a hint of the treasures within, and the name was inscribed on a small nameplate. There was a suggestion that this shop needed no advertising. Vanimöre pushed his mind inward, through bricks, minutely crumbling mortar, but there was no living being in the shop now. The house was an L shape and there were no doubt store rooms and perhaps bedrooms behind the shop.

'Motion sensors,' Vanimöre said. 'And the whole shop will be heavily alarmed.'

They went on down to the small harbour then, and, in the mild dusk, walked back to their hotel. Because the antique shop was not open on Sunday, they spent the day relaxing, that is: researching and talking. The police had, so far, not contacted them about Justin Robert's death; Ellie at the Yew Tree had made a statement to the effect that he had been sleazy, rude and sexist toward her, and had insulted Sam (and also Vanimöre and Leon). He had no reason, she said, to follow them, but guessed it was because he was simply a 'nasty piece of work' and was trying to antagonise or frighten them. She also vouchsafed that he had been drinking, not much, but enough to make his

driving a hazard both to him and others. The police, having made their own investigations into Justin Roberts were unimpressed with their findings.

'I see that Rochford has been settled a long time,' Vanimöré remarked. 'There was a Saxon manor there before the conquest.'

'Yes, that's right,' Leon agreed. 'There's nothing left of it, but it's on the site of the main house. It was given to a Norman after Hastings. The Saxon thegn had been killed there, and the young soldier married his widow. It wasn't particularly big, but it's in rich countryside. Is it relevant, do you think?'

'I'm not sure,' Vanimöré admitted. 'It might be. And then there's the barrow.'

'Yes, and there's a small wood a few miles away called, by the locals, Bathhouse Copse; there's a tradition there's a Roman villa in the vicinity but the farmer who owns the land was always against an excavation. Roland found potsherds when he was young, so there's something in it, but that region was heavily settled by the Romans.'

'Layers upon layers of history,' Vanimöré remarked. 'But it comes down to two things, I think: either Arcadia Holdings, i.e. Thuringwethil, found something there, or it was deemed an excellent place to *keep* something.'

'You could be right,' Leon acknowledged. 'It's not far from London but it's quiet, very rural; nothing ever happens. Or so I used to think,' he added with a charming grin.

Vanimöré had reluctantly agreed that Leon go to the antiques shop, but to take his gun and use it if Thuringwethil happened to be one of the staff. Sauron, if Arthur May was he, generally liked to keep her close.

'If she is not there, I just want you to observe,' he said. 'Say you're interested in antique rings for a partner, perhaps. Join us for lunch at 12.30.'

He and Sam followed Leon down to the shop, but saw nothing untoward as Leon went in, and strolled on to the harbour, A warm wind gusted in from the sea with a hint of drizzle on the air. A quiet Sunday, just a few tourists who would soon head for lunch and their hotels or caravans or cottages...

Sam, looking down at the water said, 'I can't swim, or not very well.'

'You did not learn at school?'

'Yes, when I was young, but later the swimming lessons were always after school, and I wasn't allowed.'

'I'll have to teach you,' Vanimöré said turning back and wondering what would happen if he threw Sam into deep water, such as at the quarry. If he was Sam, he would drown without aid and that was the problem. Elgalad-Eru always went down to the wire.

Only two people emerged from the antiques shop as they passed it going back into the town, an elderly couple, one of them carrying a smart shop bag. Everything seemed quiet. Normal.

‘Mr. Steel.’ The head receptionist raised her hand, then came around the desk, trotted toward him. ‘I have a message for you, sir.’

‘Thank you.’ Vanimörel went cold, but said nothing until he and Sam were in his room. He noted, as he ripped the envelope, the expensive paper.

Mr. Steele is invited to Rochford Manor this evening at 12 o clock. His friend Leon St. Cloud will be in attendance.

He crumpled the letter in his fist his mind suddenly still with that icy clarity he had inherited to his father.

‘Mr. Steele?’ Sam was saying urgently. ‘*Mr. Steele?*’

‘There is something I have to do, Samael,’ he said. ‘You will need to stay with your mother and Madge a while, or I can take you back to Southview.’

Sam moved forward. ‘What’s happened?’ He caught the note Vanimörel held out and hissed. ‘You were right then! Wh—what are you going to do?’

‘Go to Rochford, of course.’

‘But isn’t it a trap?’

‘Of course, Samael, and I am going to walk right into it.’ He turned away. ‘Sauron — or Thuringwethil — acted very quickly. I’m almost impressed.’

‘I want to come with you.’ Sam caught at his arm.

‘Out of the question,’ Vanimörel snapped. ‘I can book you in with your mother and aunt, or take you back to Southview, but you cannot accompany me to Rochford. I have trained generation upon generation of young men and taken them to battle, Samael, but none of them before they were *ready*. And you are not, not yet.’

Sam, colour heightened, eyes burning, held Vanimörel’s gaze for a moment, and then turned away. ‘Alright, I’ll go back to Southview,’ he said tightly. ‘I don’t want to spoil their holiday.’

‘You have 5 minutes to go and pack.’

A little more than ten minutes later, Vanimörel was turning the Bentley out of the hotel car park.

‘But what will you *do*?’ Sam asked as they left the town.

‘I’m not sure. Assess the situation, see what Sauron wants.’ And what *did* he want. Did he think Vanimörel was in fact his son of this world? *Well, father, thou wilt be disappointed.*

‘But you might be killed,’ Sam burst out.

‘So I might but it’s only temporary.’ He glanced aside. ‘I come back. Just a little angrier.’

The lovely eyes stared at him. ‘*What?*’

'Trust me, I have experience in this. So, we'll stop for lunch somewhere quiet...there's plenty of time. I'm not driving to Rochford,' he added.

'You...are you going to use that...a portal?' Sam asked.

'I am, yes.'

'Will you take Coldagnir and Edenel?'

'Edenel is otherwise occupied, Coldagnir yes, if necessary.'

'Don't go on your own,' Sam pleaded earnestly. 'I don't want you to be...'

'I won't be...' Vanimöre teased. 'Or at least, you would know nothing of it.'

'That isn't exactly comforting,' Sam flashed. 'I just...oh, never mind.'

After ten or so miles, Vanimöre pulled in at a pleasant looking roadside pub and they ordered a light lunch.

'I'm not very hungry,' Sam excused himself, picking at his meal.

'You may as well eat. John Lawson is a brilliant handyman, but Madge says he can cremate a salad. Or you can stay at Summerland if you want. There's plenty in the fridge and freezer.'

'Can I?' Sam asked eagerly. 'Not for the food. Can I wait for you?'

'If you wish, yes, but tell John where you are.'

Sam's eyes fixed on his plate. 'I'll come over when he thinks I've gone to the caravan, actually. He...'

Vanimöre waited.

'He's not homophobic,' Sam glanced up, then down again. 'I just don't like the fact that he comments on...you.' A blush spread up to under his curly hairline.

'I understand; you worry he thinks I am paying for your services,' Vanimöre said calmly. 'Samael, you must learn to care nothing what other people think of you.'

'Easier said than done,' Sam muttered.

'Granted, but wise to learn the knack, all the same. If it's any comfort, it gets easier as you get older.'

Sam said nothing. He was drinking a pint of Strongbow cider. 'Headbanging gear' as it was sometimes called.

'Worried about Leon?' Vanimöre asked.

'Well, yes, but...' Sam shrugged. 'He doesn't like me. I supposed I'm too *poor* for the likes of him. Common.'

'It's very hard for someone like him not to sound snobbish,' Vanimöre agreed. 'But I truly don't think he dislikes you for being poor. I did question him about it.'

'Oh god,' Sam choked. 'What did he say?'

'I think he's just cautious,' Vanimöré soothed. 'It's part of his job, after all. he is more focussed on your connection with Ronnie Trent—'

'There isn't a *connection!*' Hotly.

'Of course not, but he is trained to look at all angles.'

When they got in the Bentley, Vanimöré realised that Sam's drinking of the cider had been an attempt at Dutch courage. He was in no way drunk, but some of his inhibitions were loosened. He did not immediately fasten his seatbelt but stared ahead through the window.

'Mr. Steele. You said you wanted to deal with Ronnie Trent.'

'I intend to, yes.'

'He might go to Rochford if I'm there,' Sam rushed on. 'He said...'

'Did he give you a number to contact him?'

'No. No, but Chez would have had a contact number. I know you can get that.'

'By now, Samael, he will know what happened; he would be wary of any contact from you.' Vanimöré watched him closely. 'I am not using you as bait, my dear.' He mentally kicked himself for the endearment as Sam flashed him a look.

'I just want to help! I want to *do* something, not feel so useless —' he slammed his hands on his knees.

'You killed Chez,' Vanimöré said dryly. 'I am not sure how much more you want to accomplish on your first week in my employ. Listen. Look at me. You have had a very traumatic few days; your emotions are running high, just don't let them run away with you. Seatbelt,' he added, starting the car.

There was a sudden movement, a rush, and Sam threw himself at Vanimöré, kissing his cheek, the edge of his mouth, his lips. He was hot, breathless and trembling and Vanimöré froze at the memory that exploded through him. For a moment, he smelt that sweet, springtime scent of rain and blossom. Then he reached out and gently pushed Sam back into his seat, resisting an urge to slam that curly head through the windscreen. He bit his tongue so hard he tasted blood.

'Samael,' he said. 'I am not going to bed a young man who has recently been raped. Do you understand?' Once he had, not a young man, but Maglor. And Maglor had never been able to forgive him. Rightly.

'Sorry!'

'It is not your fault,' Vanimöré assured him. 'It is the fault of what was done to you —'

'— It's not that.' Sam buried his head in his hands, then looked up. 'I want to...to forget that night, I want to know what it's like with someone like you. I don't want to...to define myself as a rape victim.'

Vanimöré placed a hand lightly his shoulder. 'I know.' Had he not vowed that he would never permit Melkor and Sauron, their use of him, to control his attitude to sex? 'You will never forget, but you can take control of it. You *are* a rape victim, but it is not your fault and not your life.' Under his hand, Sam's skin was hot as fire, muscles taunt. He nodded. Vanimöré let the car sit idle. 'I would advise you to not rush headlong into sex to get rid of the taste. Sex is not the answer; in such cases it is only an escape, and can be a pleasant one, but never use it to fill the void,

Samael. Only *you* can do that. No-one else. Nothing else. Come. Fasten your seatbelt.'

Wordlessly, Sam did so. A few miles went past before he spoke.

'I didn't mean I wanted to use you.' His voice sounded stilted.

Vanimöré flicked a sidelong glance that Sam did not see. 'Of course not.'

'I just...I mean *look* at you.' He laughed with a trace of hysteria and self-mockery.

'Yes, I'm wealthy and powerful, I drive expensive cars, live in a mansion—'

'*Not that!* Sam's eyes were enormous, his cheeks painted rose. '*Look at you.* You're so impossibly beautiful, and when I saw you without this disguise or whatever —'

'Glamour.' Vanimöré edged around a lumbering campervan.

'Glamour then. It's the first time I ever...*wanted* anyone.'

'Ah, I see. A kind of superhero-worship.'

'I've *seen* superhero films,' Sam said passionately. 'You're in another league entirely. I want you. I want to be like you.'

The road signs indicated 70 mph as max speed. The Bentley's engine growled upward.

'No you don't, sweetheart.' Vanimöré's lips twisted unpleasantly. 'You just think you do.'

'I—'

'You want to be *like* me? You don't even know me!' He was aware of the cold brutality of his answers, recalled, with a kind of nauseating shame, his words to a young Elgalad, an attempt to make Elgalad run from him, hate him. 'Do you think I was born like this?'

'No, I—'

'No. I had to be trained, I had to learn. What you *want* is the end result. Well, the end result does not come without a great deal of pain, Samael. Do you understand?'

Very softly. 'Yes.' The wind buffered his curls, then a sidelong look under angelic curls, with eyes as clear as we fall. 'But I still want to be like you....And I still want *you*.'

In sudden annoyance Vanimöré put on the radio, which tuned automatically to the local station.

Come see victory, in the land called fantasy

Loving life, a new decree,

Bring your mind to everlasting liberty

Our minds will explore together, old worlds, we conquer, forever

We then, will expand love together, as one

~ The Blind God ~

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

~ The Blind God ~

Vanimöré pulled into Southview, stopped the Bentley. ‘Are you alright, now?’

‘Fine, thank-you,’ Sam said without looking at him, and walked to get his overnight bag from the boot. He hefted it over one shoulder then walked away with a strong suggestion of dudgeon; a young man’s outraged sulk. Vanimöré watched him for a moment, wondering how authentic it was, then pulled out and drove back to Summerland.

The cleaners had gone; the house was silent, empty. Vanimöré both missed the company and was relieved. In his life he had become accustomed to both loneliness and company but the last few days had been like having two young warriors under his wing again, recalled to him the days of Sud Sicanna when he had first truly stretched himself and discovered he could rule.

The quiet was interrupted by the buzz of his phone. On the drive back, he had ignored Howard’s calls, not wanting to discuss anything with Samael listening.

‘Yes, Howard?’

‘*Steele*,’ Howard bellowed, so that Vanimöré winced and held the phone away from his ear. ‘Do you know what’s *happening*? Why the hell were you not answering your phone?’

‘Yes, Howard, I know.’

‘Some woman called me. I’m putting a team together —‘

‘No,’ Vanimöré interrupted. ‘I’ll deal with it. But I may need you, later. Don’t go on vacation.’

‘What are you going to *do*?’

‘Is Rochford Hall booked tonight, if not openly, then privately? Find out for me.’

He sensed Howard swallowing fury. ‘Anything else?’

‘Get back to me with the information.’

Coldagnir, as he readied his gear. Drive the Bentley down to Arden Hill. Park it at the inn.

Of course, and then?

Be ready to act at my word. I want to get a feel for this, first. And anyhow, he smiled with teeth. I do like the spice of danger.

And Samael? Elgalad?

That was not spice, that was slow poison. He dropped his glamour, braided and coiled up his hair. And I do not know about Samael. Eru will remain hidden until he wishes to reveal himself.

Thou hast never tried to hide from him, Coldagnir remarked curiously, and Vanimöre's hands stilled.

I never thought of doing it, he replied slowly. Having to wear glamour is bad enough. Hiding? It does not sit well with me.

He may be playing for high stakes.

Vanimöre said, *We all play for high stakes, Nemrúshkeraz.* He needed more insight into Eru, into that ancient universe. It would have to wait.

Howard came back to him. 'Yes,' he said curtly. 'Ronnie Trent has booked the manor for tonight.'

'Excellent. So have your team on standby; it's a raid, Howard. Human Trafficking, drugs.'

'Fine, fine, but what about Leon, and this Arthur May?'

'I doubt Arthur May will be taking part in any orgy, Howard.' Vanimöre wondered why he was allowing the sex party to take place, but that could wait.

'Just go carefully, Steele,' Howard warned. 'I don't want to lose Leon in some balls-up.'

'Neither do I. Coldagnir will be in touch, later.' He cut Howard off and checked his gear one more time, then left the house, walking into the pines and the barrow.

He had looked at Google Earth images and more importantly, shared Coldagnir's earlier reconnaissance of Rochford Manor and its grounds.

The house itself was set about four hundred yards from the road, and half a mile on from the picturesque little village with its duck pond and old church and traditional inn. The land south of the Surrey Hills was a pretty patchwork of woods and fields, its villages some of the most charming in the country. Little wonder Leon had felt more at home there than his family's gaunt and remote mansion on the lonely Norfolk Coast.

By contrast Rochford Manor was almost cosy; nestled in a bower of trees it was red-brick, with tall chimneys and seemed built more for comfort than to be awe-inspiring. A nobleman's country lodge in older times. A drive swept around to the front, garages had been built off to the left, and at the back was what had been a stable block, now serving the purpose of sheds and storage rooms.

When Vanimöre stepped through the portal, which came out not inside the barrow, (which would have trapped him in the earth) but beside it, he dropped into a hunter's crouch, alert, listening. The

sky was mild, grey, quiet but for a blackbird's call and — the sound of a van. The barrow was hidden from the house by a stand of trees, but he could see to the gateway where a white caterer's van was pulling away.

He walked silently to the trees, keeping in their shadow as he surveyed the house. Searching the trees, he found a venerable oak, and climbed it until the wealth of newly opened leaves hid him in their lush greenness but still gave him a view of the drive and house. He reached out...

Metal, fire, dark incense burned on bloody altars. Sauron. Not his father, but the same presence, the same sense of cold and intelligent power.

I doubt thou couldst have got here from St. Austell in this amount of time. Not by car. Which meant that Sauron too, could use the portals. Not surprising; he would never underestimate Sauron's intelligence on this or any other world.

He waited, clearing his mind, not permitting it to wander. So he had waited for a thousand battles and skirmishes in the old world. The air smelt sweet-green and sleepy, and it would be easy to drift into speculation. He did not allow it. A tree-creeper, upside down, wound itself around the tree bole searching for insects; a butterfly, yellow as sulphur, landed on his boot. He did not move. As evening crept in he heard, through the peaceful air, the unmistakable sound of the Bentley. It passed the gates. Coldagnir would take it into the village, parking it at the inn.

The first car to arrive at Rochford came at eight o'clock, a cream Rolls Royce that disgorged a large man, beautifully suited, whose plump fingers showed gold at every knuckle. Three men, his appointed 'Mindors', closed around him.

More cars followed: a Lamborghini, two Ferrari's, two Jaguars, another Rolls, chauffeur driven, carrying a well-known Member of Parliament known to have his eye on the Prime Ministership and equally well-known for his racist and homophobic views that, of course, he stridently denied as being 'fake news'. He strolled in, clearly at his ease.

The women did not come for another hour, driven up to the house in a small bus with dark-tinted windows and the legend 'Country Travel Independent Tours' on the side. Vanimöre's eyes narrowed as he watched them alight. Eight women, four men, although one could more accurately call them 'girls and boys'. None looked over sixteen. The girls wore tiny skirts, five inch heels and tops that hugged their breasts, leaving their midriffs bare. The boys were more casual in jeans and tee shirts. All of them had the blank, beaten-down expressions of people who had no choice in what they did. The balmy evening air bore the scent of cheap perfume and cigarettes. Four big men herded them into the manor.

After a while, several men re-emerged from the house and stationed themselves around the cars, smoking or vaping. They were watchful, but not too much so, obviously familiar with the routine.

Coldagnir

I am here.

Call Howard for me. Tell him the raid begins at 1.00. Tell him that James Carlton the Deputy PM is here. He does not walk free of this. I want pictures. There will be pressure to conceal his presence here. Howard will ignore it. This bastard is going down so far he will not see daylight in a hundred years.

Coldagnir assented.

And still, Vanimöre waited as the dusk began to fall. With the days reaching toward Midsummer, night came late and luminous. The curtains were drawn in the Manor, lights showing behind them; he could hear the muffled beat of music. All the better; the men outside would be forgotten by those inside.

He kept low to the ground, under the trees, as he made his way to a point where he had all of the men in his view, and waited as the cloud cover shielded the moon. He watched the men, now standing in half-dark, with a contemptuous smile on his mouth.

Orc-blood. Petty, frightened bullies. Carrying guns, trusting to violence. No vision, no empathy. So...die.

He came out of the dark like a shadow and as silent, reaching for the diamond-shaped throwing knives. One two, three...he heard the *thwack* as they pierced flesh, saw the men fall to the floor. The others turned, eyes wide. Just another three...and the knives struck again. One man was turning, mouth open to yell; Vanimöre leaped forward, struck him to the ground with one foot, and crushed his voice box.

There was no alarm, which surprised him. No motion sensors, here, but then he thought, this was the middle of rural England; there would be foxes, deer, badgers, that would set off the sensors. That was the reason for the (exceptionally inadequate) guards. They could *see* if anyone entered the grounds, or should, whereas the alarm would cast a damper on their 'party'. Vanimöre smiled, took the bodies to the barrow.

'If thou wert still alive, boys, this would quite literally be the trip of a lifetime.'

One by one, lifting them by their collars and belts, he tossed them through the Portal to emerge, not in Summerland, or anywhere else on the face of the Earth, but into nowhere, the space 'Outside'.

Quiet closed over the night. A nightingale sang from the woods beyond the house. Vanimöre listened for a moment, then glamourised himself: dark jeans, boots, a shirt, and strolled up the drive, rang the bell on the front door.

Black sheath dress, rubies, black hair piled high, lips like a vampire's kiss...naturally.

'Hello, Thuringwethil,' he said lazily. 'I believe I have a meeting with Arthur May.'

Thuringwethil drew the door wider, her lightless eyes fixed on him with a strange hunger — or not so strange — Vanimöre had been the recipient of it before. She curled a long-nailed hand, indicating he followed her and her high heels click-clicked over the tiles of the empty hall.

'Keeping you on a tight leash, is he not, lady?'

She flung round, bared her teeth at him, a look terribly animal stretching the exquisite face into the creature he had known in Angband. Yes, it was never far below the surface, no matter how lovely the masks she wore.

They went through to the back of the house, to the kitchens, where champagne stood in ice-buckets, and into a utility room beyond. A new security door stood here, and Thuringwethil unlocked it.

Stairs lead down from a mezzanine into a room with doors leading off and a corridor. All was tiled,

spotless as a bank vault. *Perhaps it is.* Stopping before one of the doors, Thuringwethil cast him another long look, licked her crimson lips, then opened it and stood back.

Before entering, Vanimöré released the glamour again. Thuringwethil hissed.

The room was square, almost bare but for a table and office chairs, a netspresso machine — and a large safe built into one wall. In one chair sat Leon, hands behind his back kept there, by the evidence of strain in his shoulders, by some sort of manacle. His thick dark hair was tousled, there was a bruise on one cheek and blood at the corner of his mouth, but he seemed relatively unharmed. Vanimöré threw him a smile and a wink and the intense blue eyes widened. Leon made no other reaction; he would have been trained in hostage situations.

At the table, a laptop open, sat Arthur May. Or rather, Sauron, because he too had dropped the glamour he must needs wear on this world. In place of the robes Vanimöré was accustomed to seeing his father wear, he had adopted a long leather coat over jeans and shirt. His white-gold hair was coiled up much like Vanimöré's own.

Sauron, but not Vanimöré's father. *Or not my father.* In face and form, from the cold, straight features, to the tall, slim figure, all was the same. His eyes, lavender with the red of fire behind them, ran over Vanimöré and quirked upward.

'Thank you for coming,' he said courteously, then: 'And armed to the teeth. How many did you kill, hmmm?'

'Only six. Outside.'

Sauron steepled his hands. 'Did you remove the bodies? It would rather spoil their party to find six corpses.'

'How dreadful. I must say I am surprised at thy choice of company, but then again,' with a look of contempt that went far into the past. 'Perhaps not.'

Sauron's mouth spasmed briefly, then stilled. 'They? Nothing more than a useful cover. Useful in other ways too.' He disposed them with a gesture of one long hand. He wore a ring with a red stone that glowered dark as blood in the strip lighting.

'Let me guess: In moving certain artefacts across borders?'

'Clever boy.' Sauron showed white teeth. 'Trent likes to think himself a connoisseur of esoterica. More specifically of so-magical artefacts.' he looked amused. 'Yes, he is helpful sometimes. To keep him sweet, as they say, I allow him to use Rochford for his little...amusements.'

Amusements, Vanimöré thought with a tremble of anger but to Sauron, after Utumno and Angband, the rape of sex slaves would indeed be a small matter, not worth considering.

'Was it Trent who gave Chez Bennett a minor Ring?' He tossed it on the table where it rolled and settled. Sauron picked it up, eyes narrowing.

'Chez Bennett? Ah the father of that lovely young man. Yes, it must have been Trent. Foolish, but then Trent has a mind like mud: malleable, but dense. He must have been most impressed by...what is his name? Samael.' He slid the ring into a coat pocket.

There was a small silence. Leon kept his eyes fixed on Vanimöré.

'It has been quite the challenge,' Sauron murmured. 'Meeting the elusive Lucien Steele.'

'Not so elusive, Mr. May, just very choosy.' Vanimöré stifled his impatience. Sauron always knew how to bring pressure to bear and even now, so long after, and with more power than Sauron could

ever dream of possessing, there was a part of Vanimöré that was always the child who wanted his father to love him. Whatever blood ran in his veins, whatever his life had become, he was defined by Sauron in ways that were older than blood, went deeper than hate. *Almost*, almost, he could understand that in this world, Vanimöré had followed Sauron, not resisted him.

‘What wouldst thou have of me?’ he asked. ‘I am not thy son, Sauron, not in this world, and I owe thee nothing.’

You are not my son,’ Sauron agreed, rather to Vanimöré’s surprise. ‘He died, in Barad-dûr. And my son, at least here, would not speak to me as you do, and could not do what you can. And will. And my son would have written off Leon St. Cloud.’

‘I have no doubt,’ Vanimöré said, not looking at Leon. ‘But I have learned not to waste useful things...most of the time. And I admit to curiosity. Why did your servant kill Leon’s uncle?’

‘Ah yes, the eccentric Roland. Well, I tried to deal with him. I had heard of him for years, amateur that he was, with his theories and dreams and enthusiasms, his light fingers...He came into my shop about ten years ago, wanting me to see if I could identify something. I asked where he had acquired it, and he said he had found it.’ He laughed softly. ‘Found it. Do you know what it was? One of the lesser Palantir. He said it was in his cellars. If offered to purchase it, but he refused. So I began to wonder about him, and what else might be in his...cellars.’

‘So you sent Thuringwethil?’ Vanimöré glanced toward the door where she stood sentinel.

‘I sent Thuringwethil. Roland was ripe and ready to fall. Eventually, she got it out of him, where he had found it. Budapest, apparently. It took her longer to get him to show her the cellars.’

Leon sat with downcast eyes.

Vanimöré lifted his brows, waited. Sauron rose elegantly, walked to the safe.

‘The sex party that they are holding upstairs,’ he said. ‘Is only one reason they are here. They are base creatures with base appetites, but their true reason for coming here is what happens after. Trent is the...’ He shrugged, ‘grand master, high priest, whatever high-flown title he calls himself, of a secret society devoted to the worship of strange gods, old, dark gods, whose names are almost lost, fallen angels, demons. Rochford is where they practise their rituals.’

‘I would not have guessed Trent was that kind of person,’ Vanimöré admitted.

‘He is not. He only thinks he is. As I said, a mind like mud. His group’s current *project* is Shamash, the sun god of the Akkadians.’ He turned his head, slanted a familiar smile at Vanimöré. Leon lifted his head sharply. ‘Hence his interest in arcana and ancient artefacts. He plays, as all of them do, a little blood, chants that are supposed to impress, rituals with candles, and the artefacts he has collected, or bought from me. If he — they — knew what was in here, right under their feet, they would go mad for the knowledge, and insane if they saw it.’

As he turned back to the safe, Vanimöré opened his mind to Coldagnir. *This, my dear, is perfect for thee. They seek to call Shamash. Why not give them a taste. Just a taste. I want them in gaol, or at least confined, not burned to heaps of char. If they go mad, well, hardly thy fault, is it?*

He felt Coldagnir’s answering smile. *I am Shamash, I am all gods of the sun, Vanimöré. Certainly, I will reveal myself.*

The safe door opened. Sauron removed a rounded lump of clay about the size and shape of a canon ball, set it on the table.

Vanimöré said nothing. A wash of heat prickled over his skin. Leon stared at it, brows drawn.

Sauron's face was a blank mask but behind it his mind *burned*.

'Oh, a lump of dirt,' Vanimörel said dryly. 'How *very* exciting.'

Sauron's eyes flashed up. 'Break it,' he said. Thuringwethil entered the room with a clip-clip of heels, and positioned herself behind Leon, long nails settled lightly against his cheek, lips parted to show her fangs, the drip of poison catching the harsh light.

Leon closed his eyes.

'If thou canst not even break this, then how wilt thou use it?' Vanimörel enquired.

Sauron lifted something from the safe. It looked a little like an old-fashioned lantern-case save beautifully cast in silver, with a cavity for the light source and a shield that slid into place over it, and could be pulled back.

'How in the Hells did Roland come by this?' Vanimörel wondered. 'It looks like nothing, so why would he even pick it up?'

'He did not,' Sauron said. 'In this case, he really was telling the truth that it was found in the cellars. How long it had been there, I know not. I have a theory though, that they protect themselves by looking like nothing, gathering earth or sand around them as a shield.'

Vanimörel nodded. *Yes, they are sentient enough to do just that.*

'When you have broken the casing,' Sauron continued. 'Place it in the housing.'

'What is it?' Leon asked hoarsely, hardly moving his lips.

Sauron glanced at him. 'One of Roland's ancestors found this, or it was here long before them.' His mouth quirked.

Vanimörel said flatly: 'It is a Silmaril.' He looked at Sauron. 'Afraid it will burn thee, as it burned thy master?' he mocked.

'I will learn to wield it as he never could,' Sauron replied with a red flash of his eyes. 'After, you can go. But our business is not finished.'

'Thou hast never spoken a truer word, Sauron. Our business is never finished. But tell me, before I essay this: How didst thou know about me?'

Sauron tipped his head. His eyes flicked to the ball of earth then back again. 'My dear Vanimörel, you are too noticeable. But it was from Roland I first heard of you. He did so love to talk.' He sat down at the desk. 'It was at a bar in Mombasa in the 60's. There was this voluble Englishman, smoking *hashish* and talking about a vision he had had in Delphi.' A slow blink of long-lashed eyes. 'Of winged gods with violet eyes. You may be sure I spoke to him.'

Leon flushed as if retroactively embarrassed for his great-uncle.

'Not enough,' Vanimörel responded. 'That is not enough to lead thee to me.'

'Of course not,' Sauron acknowledged smoothly. 'But I know what Delphi is as well as you. Do you think I cannot use the portals? And do you know how rare your eyes are? And so, I travelled the world, portal to portal, and waited. Or I sent others. Expendables.' A shrug, a tip of the head. 'But often you came through at night, when Thuringwethil could follow you in her other form.'

Still, it took a long time to link you with Lucien Steele. Sometimes you disappeared for a long time. Where were you? We shall have to talk about that.'

Vanimöρέ shrugged. It was chance, as many things were, but perhaps it was more, even across worlds, he was linked to Sauron.

'Thou wert searching for thy son, but thou knowest and has said, I am not him.'

'No, and we need to talk about that, also and where you came by the power you possess, but first, this.' He nodded at the clay ball. 'I admit, I have tried to crack this, and cannot. But I wager all that *you* can.'

'It will profit thee nothing to possess this, just as it profited Melkor nothing.'

'I am not Melkor. He merely coveted the Silmarils because they were the only part of Fëanor he could hold. Or not, in the end.'

True enough. Vanimöρέ thought of Maglor, of Tindómion, of Fëanor imprisoned in the Halls of Mandos. The Silmarils were important only because they contained part of his soul, yet for Maglor they would mean everything. After so long, something of his father's to hold. He glanced at Leon, at Thuringwethil's deadly nails against his flesh, at Sauron, the red fire in his eyes drowning the lavender.

'If I break this, thou wilt permit Leon to leave? Forgive me if I take leave to doubt it.'

'Leon St. Cloud is a means to an end, nothing more than that,' Sauron replied. The blue eyes flashed up, frowning. 'He can die, or he can live. And you have little choice. I know you, you see. I have studied Lucien Steele, insofar as I can. You *care*. Your charitable institutions, your private donations, your desire to protect. It is a weakness, and I *fully* intend to exploit it.'

Vanimöρέ said nothing. Sauron had ever exploited his weaknesses to bring him to heel when nothing else would. He looked at Leon and remembered Claire in Summerland, a different world, scratches on her cheeks, burning up with the beginnings of the infection that would have brought agonising death. And he had spoken to Leon of Thuringwethil's poison. The young man held himself very still.

Mentally, he shrugged, laid a hand on the clay ball. He thought the earth would soften, slough away. It did not. There was a sharp report, and he turned as splinters of hard clay shot everywhere. There was a scream, a man's cry.

The room glowed with the silvery light of the jewel. It spangled the air with a million motes of brilliance, transformed every dust mote into a fiery diamond. There had never been a light like this, save the one that dwelt in Fëanor's eyes.

Thuringwethil had one hand over her eyes. Not so Sauron, but then, he had seen the Silmarils set in Melkor's Iron Crown. He looked fascinated. Leon's eyes were closed. Blood marked his face and Vanimöρέ's heart jolted sickeningly. When Thuringwethil shrieked, hurt by the light, her hand must have jerked, nails cutting into Leon's skin.

There was not much time.

'Place it in the casket,' Sauron ordered.

Heat welled against Vanimöρέ's hand as he lifted the Silmaril quickly, deposited it within the casket and slid the shield into place.

'I am leaving now,' he said. 'And talking Leon with me.'

Sauron smiled quizzically, lifting his brows. And Leon, looking up at him said, 'Father?'

Vanimörel froze.

'I know you can see through glamour, just as I can,' Sauron said, still smiling faintly. 'But in Leon's case, there was no glamour to see through. He was born into this world, born to another family. But still, my reborn son. I felt him, and it took many years to track him down.'

Vanimörel thought of Elves in other worlds, born into Mortal bodies as a punishment.

'Father,' Leon said. 'Please.' He struggled. Sauron laid a hand on his cheek, tenderly wiped away the blood.

'You have been useful,' he said kindly. 'And clever enough. And a good actor. But you are not him,' he nodded to Vanimörel. 'And you will die anyhow, I cannot give thee immortality.'

'But you promised.' The huge blue eyes were wide and pleading and angry. Horror dawned in them like a red sunrise.

'I lied,' Sauron admitted. 'I do on occasion.' He looked at Vanimörel who stared back blankly. 'I was able to shield his inner thoughts of me, of what he was, but you never really looked, did you? To you, he was just a young man. And he spun a good tale, did he not? His use is at an end, a pity really, as he was a good source of information.'

The cut on Leon's cheek was turning a vicious red. He shivered suddenly, violently. 'Please, father.'

'I can do nothing,' Sauron snapped impatiently. 'And you were a liability in your old life. Something went wrong somewhere. You clung; you were not strong enough. It was becoming the same here, a need to be loved...But you,' to Vanimörel. 'You are cast in a different mould. You are pure steel. You were the perfect weapon, I wager, and did not die.'

'I have died more than once, Sauron.'

'Interesting,' Sauron mused. 'Yet here you are. We must talk about it some time. Come.' He gestured to Thuringwethil who moved away from the chair.

There was a *crack*. A red-black flower bloomed at her throat. Hands flying to the pumping wound, she staggered back into the wall. Another shot punched a third eye. At that moment the house seemed to shift a little on its foundations, there was a rumble as of a distant earthquake. Coldagnir.

As Thuringwethil slid down the wall, Sauron threw the heavy silver container at Samael, who stepped aside to dodge it. His shot went wide, and Sauron vanished out of the door, pushing it shut behind him.

'What are you doing here?' Vanimörel demanded.

'I followed you. Through the Portal. I was worried. I...'

'How very enterprising of you.' Vanimörel held out his hand. 'You could have ended up anywhere. Give me that.' Thuringwethil was twitching in her death throes, but her poison was running rampant through Leon, who groaned through chattering teeth: 'Please. I'm sorry. I really...I wanted to...It would have been a hard choice.' Another shiver overtook him. 'You, or him.' Then pain exploded in his eyes, a growing terror of worse to come, his own death, when he had dreamed of unending life. 'Please. Help me!'

'I know. I know,' Vanimöré said. 'Blood can mean nothing — and everything. But we *all* have a choice, Leon St. Cloud.' He lifted the gun and shot him through the heart. His body slumped in the chair. Vanimöré pivoted on the ball of his foot, trained the muzzle on Sam whose wide, clear eyes lifted to his face.

'I truly do not know,' he said slowly. 'I cannot, can I? Sauron was right, I *do* have a weakness. But not for those who betray me. For those, Samael, I have no pity at all.'

Sam's lips parted. He said, voice bewildered: '*What?* Betray you? How...why?'

It was unbearable. Vanimöré set the gun's muzzle between Samael's eyes, which widened, then closed. He whispered, very softly, 'You wouldn't really kill me...Vanimöré.'

His heartbeats dinning in his ear, Vanimöré reached forward with his free arm, drew the angel-curved head to rest against his shoulder. He felt the lithe body tremble.

'Do you know, what the Gnostics believe the name Samael means?' he murmured into those soft curls, and felt Sam's breath hitch. He raised his head like a man expecting a kiss. Vanimöré smiled bitterly. 'The blind god.' He brought the gun into the space between their bodies and shot Samael through the heart. He jerked once. Vanimöré caught him as he fell. Closed the wide, clear eyes. 'The blind god,' he repeated. 'I was. And I was, was I not? But not blind enough.'

The room smelt of cordite and blood, the seep of human waste. Vanimöré went to the table, sat down.

Coldagnir, when everything is over, perhaps thou couldst come and let me out. I think I need a moment.

And he put his head in his hands.

OooOooO

'Jesus,' Howard said, some hours later. 'Steele, my apologies. Leon St. Cloud...checked out completely.' He shook his head, glanced around the room. 'Let's get out of here,' he added with distaste. 'And er...can you do the thing you do, to...hide yourself?'

'Ah, the glamour, Yes, sorry.' Vanimöré picked up the silver container as a team entered with body bags. 'His meetings with Sauron would have been very secret. And there was no blood tie, no link for you to find. You will simply have to up the security of your operatives. All of them.'

Howard looked embarrassed. 'Being done, Steele. But Sam Bennett? That boy?'

'Samael Bennett was an imposter, Howard.' Vanimöré went quickly up the stairs. It was already light, and the front door stood open. He drew in deep breaths of the cool, fresh air.

'For god's sake! An imposter? Like Leon? Leon...my god—'

'Not exactly. But I would give something to know where the real Samael is.' He did not think that Elgalad-Eru had been born into this world as he had been into the old one. Perhaps, but why

bother? (*I would not.*) Too many things could happen to a child born into a poor family with a violent male in control of it. Elgalad had the patience, yes, but it was also unnecessary. Better just to leave the greater part of his power behind, as Vanimöré did, and take the appearance of a Mortal. There had been a Sam Bennett, once. Was he still alive, somewhere?

‘Perhaps he ran away from home when he was younger. It would be an ideal opportunity for someone to take on his form.’

‘Unless the real one came back, unless he contacted his mother.’

‘It is possible the imposter ensured he did not.’

‘Jesus, you think the imposter killed him?’

‘Perhaps. Or he was just lucky. Bennett controlled that household. The real Samael knew that.’ Vanimöré trod down the steps. ‘No letter would reach his mother, and her phone was monitored. A great many teenagers go missing and never contact their homes. Some run from abuse, others have their own demons and their parents cannot explain it.’ He considered. ‘Perhaps the real Samael judged it better for him and his mother to simply vanish forever.’

Yes, but who is he, Steele? The imposter?’

‘One of the things you prefer not to think about, Howard.’ Vanimöré strode down the drive.

‘But *not* working for Sauron?’ Howard pressed.

Vanimöré shook his head. ‘That one works only for himself.’

‘How did you know, though?’ Howard trotted to catch up. ‘Have you known since you first met him?’ he demanded incredulously.

‘No. I cannot know. He can hide himself from me, the only being in any universe or beyond who can.’ Vanimöré did not break stride. Dark vans swerved into the drive.

‘Don’t worry about it Howard, this is between him and me...and a few others.’

‘But you killed him,’ Howard panted. ‘You *must* have known.’

Vanimöré stopped. ‘He called me by my name. My true name. Edenel spoke it once when Samael was there, but quietly. Samael could not have heard him, not with normal hearing, be it never so keen.’

‘But...you left him with the others, they might have—’

‘They did not.’ He did not know it, and would not ask.

‘God, Steele,’ Howard said gloomily. ‘The shit is hitting the fan on this one, I tell you. The deputy PM—’

‘Should not have been raping trafficked teenagers, Howard,’ Vanimöré replied hardly. ‘Nor should the others.’

‘I know *that*,’ Howard snapped irritably. ‘And that’s not all. They were arrested wearing red robes like something out of a damn halloween film, with weird symbols on them. Some kind of cult. The room they were in looked as if everything in it had been singed, including their robes and eyebrows. They were hysterical, never put up a fight at all.’

‘Probably playing with fire,’ Vanimöré murmured as they came to the gates. ‘And got burned.’

‘Hmm,’ Howard said with a long look at him. ‘Where are you going, back to Summerland?’

‘For now, yes.’

‘Please try to stick around for a while in case anything else goes pear-shaped.’

‘Yes, I have some work to do.’ Vanimöré lifted the silver Silmaril case. ‘And do not mourn Leon St. Cloud. He chose his side. We all do.’

‘I’m *mourning* the fact he got past all the screens,’ Howard almost shouted. ‘And what about Mr Arthur May? We have surveillance on his shop, but—’

‘Arcadia Holdings, including Mr. May are going to be horrified when they learn what has been happening here. No, leave Arthur May for now. He planted Leon to get close to me. I know his interests.’ Howard looked as if he had tasted something sour and Vanimöré said gently: ‘Do not reproach yourself for Leon. I myself should have screened him. And I did not. Well, I have learned.’ He clapped Howard on the shoulder. ‘We will talk later.’ Grumbling, Howard trudged back up the drive, shouting to someone.

The leonine purr of the Bentley’s engine slowed as it came abreast of him. A voice said, through the window, smoky, dark: ‘Looking for a ride?’

Vanimöré had to smile. ‘Why, certainly,’ he said. He placed the silver holder in the boot, and climbed into the passenger seat. ‘What are you doing here?’

‘I felt it burning, all the way across the universe and into another. I came via the portals.’ Sören’s eyes glanced aside at him. ‘I felt you, too.’ Quietly. ‘Do you want to talk about it?’

‘Later, my dear.’ Vanimöré looked straight ahead. ‘It is dealt with. Mostly. Just a few loose ends.’ Then: ‘I see you have met your namesake.’ He patted the dash.

Sören’s frown turned into laughter. ‘What? You called the car *Sören*? Why?’

‘Drive me back to Summerland and you’ll see,’ Vanimöré said. ‘He is a *very* good ride.’

End

Chapter End Notes

This is the end of this story, but it will continue on on another.

Throne of Shadows

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