

~ Worldweavers ~

Posted originally on the [Archive of Our Own](http://archiveofourown.org/works/21137195) at <http://archiveofourown.org/works/21137195>.

Rating:	Mature
Archive Warning:	No Archive Warnings Apply , Rape/Non-Con
Category:	Gen , M/M
Fandom:	The Silmarillion and other histories of Middle-Earth - J. R. R. Tolkien
Relationship:	original - Relationship
Character:	Sören Sigurdsson (OC) , Claire James (OC) , Dooku (OC) , Vanimórë (OC) , Hélóise (OC) , Maglor Makalaurë
Additional Tags:	Multiverse , Fix-It , Parallel Universes , Dark Prince 'verse , Northern Lights 'verse
Series:	Part 8 of Dance of the Veils
Stats:	Published: 2019-10-22 Chapters: 2/2 Words: 16257

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by [Spiced_Wine](#)

Summary

Depressed and abused by his partner, Justin Roberts, Sören Sigurdsson, living in London, receives an unexpected invitation which he ignores, until a rich Frenchwoman turns up and persuades him it is time to escape — to Italy and a masked ball held by the mysterious multi-billionaire Lucien Steel...

Set in the Summerland 'verse initially...

For Verhalen, because Sören was upset he was not alive in the Summerland 'verse.

Also, anyone who has read Magnificat of the Damned will know who the silver-haired man in the metal veil is....

Notes

Please Note: This AU is not one that currently exists in the (expanding) multiverse. In the 'Summerland' 'verse, Sören is dead, murdered by Justin Roberts.

Since that 'verse is going forward, nothing is altered, except that Vanimórë finds a way around it.

This is an early birthday gift for Verhalen as he's going through a tough time.

Dear Narya_Flame. Thank you so much for your help with Hélóise's French :)

~ The Invitation ~

~ The letter was unexpected, delivered one gloomy morning with a pile of bills. It was handwritten, which was unusual, and the envelope was heavy, creamy, air mail.

~

Sören opened the bills first, put them aside, mentally calculating. The money he had received from the four paintings he had displayed and sold two years ago was depleted, almost gone. Justin never failed to chide him on his lack of financial acumen even though he had been the one who ‘borrowed’ the money. He had promised to change after their months-long break-up but, once they got back together again, it had not taken long for him to revert. Except now there was no money.

There had been a few short weeks of reconciliation that were not too bad, yet Sören was still wary. More than wary, if he were honest. When he woke, those noons when the grey London light seeped, grey and lifeless as day-old dishwater through his curtains, feeling used but not satisfied, he wondered why he had permitted Justin back into his life. Justin would never openly live with him, even acknowledge he was gay. There were a handful of top sports personalities that had the courage to come out, and Justin Roberts was not one of them. Sören was not even sure he *was* gay, more bisexual, as he occasionally ogled girls. But if that was so, he wasn’t admitting it.

Sören was the secret he hid, as he hid many other things: his violence, his lashing temper, his bigotry and racism.

Sören felt trapped. He knew few people in London and Justin had been part of his life for over a year. But a fun — if not passionate — relationship had deteriorated quickly: there had been the snapping temper, the forcible sex and the constant denigration that slow as the drip of poison onto a wound, had undermined his confidence in his work.

Then had come the violence, what amounted to rape. It was enough. More than enough. When Justin was away for two days training, Sören had left, taking his few belongs (most of which was his art). The one friend he had made in London, Frankie, had helped him find this flat, but nothing in London was inexpensive, and poor though it was, Sören doubted he could continue to afford it unless more anonymous buyers turned up. And they wouldn’t — he was not painting. He had lost the fire, the vision and the drive and he felt the loss like a kind of death.

Justin had done this. Sören curled away from his constant derision and sneering like a frost-bitten rose. After he left Justin there was a bleak few months until Christmas which had been lonely. Frankie had met a girl whose family had invited them both to Liverpool for Christmas and New Year.

Which was why, when Justin came sniffing around again, Sören had accepted him back. It was a mistake, and he knew it, but there was no-one else.

He opened the letter, thinking it was one of those circulations offering gold coins or investment, in which case it had come to him by accident. But there was one single sheet of expensive, deckle-edged paper inside, written in a vivid dark script:

Sören Sigurdsson,

You are invited to a masked ball at the Villa Fiorini, Lake Como, on the 19th May.

Please present yourself at Terminal 4, Heathrow airport, on the 18th May at 2.30 p.m. You will be met and flown to Italy and conducted to the villa.

This invitation extends only to yourself. Hoping to see you there.

*Best Regards,
Lucien Steele.*

Sören snorted, raised his brows. He turned the paper, thinking to see some small print, some sign that the letter had been printed out with a thousand

others, but there was nothing. To him, it did look as if the writing had been made by a fountain pen on virgin paper.

At least it was something else to think about. He opened his laptop, typed in the signed name. There was nothing much, but what there was caused his brows to go up again. *Lucien Steele*, owner of Apollyon Enterprises, which Sören had never heard of, although it was up there with all the Fortune 500 companies. Its owner was a multi-billionaire. There was not even a picture of him.

There *was* a picture of the Villa Fiorini; at least of the gates, and Sören found it on Google Earth, but it was not close, showing a great building in beautiful grounds.

It was clearly a scam. There would be some small print somewhere, as when people were invited to purchase something expensive and probably useless, travelling miles for the privilege, some dry sandwiches and cheap fizz.

Sören couldn't quite bring himself to tear the letter in half and throw it in the bin. There was, like a scent from far away, the tantalising reminder that there was *more* than this life.

But not for him.

Justin never spoke to him about his profession, but he brought it to the flat with him in anger, bitterness and violence. On this particular day, the 11th May, it had exploded in brutality. Sören was left breathless with an asthma attack and weeping at the destruction of his latest painting. It had taken months for him to produce anything and now it was ruined. Like many men who live wholly through their physical senses and only on the surface, Justin did not understand creativity.

And then had come the warning, before Justin flung out of the flat: 'I'll be back later, and you'd better be fucking waiting for me, you frigid little shit.'

That was a reference to Sören's withdrawal from him. He needed affection, but Justin's sex did nothing for him, it was all for Justin, no-one else, and he had no finesse, gave no tenderness. It was sex and when it was not, it was only just shy of rape. Justin did not see it that was, naturally, but simply as taking something that was *his*. And Sören had made it easy for him. Lack of confidence, lack of anything really, according to Justin, who, Sören knew, had no real capacity for love, but a deep need of someone to bully. He knew it, *knew it* and sometimes a whirl of disbelief flooded his mind that he had allowed himself to fall into this pit

Sören didn't know when he had fallen asleep, save that it had been late. Justin had not come back.

The flat was quiet.

He reached for his phone. No messages. For a moment, he just lay and relished the peace, though no doubt Justin would turn up soon, foul-humoured or saccharine-sweet with apologies, although that latter happened more rarely. He did not drink much, as a rising football star he could not afford to, but Sören suspected he indulged in drugs. Not often, there were blood tests to check for such things, but at times.

The knock at the door came at four o. clock, (still no Justin) when Sören had finished clearing up and was sitting at the kitchen table. Justin had a key — had insisted on a key — and Sören received few visitors. He went to the door to find a woman standing there. She might have been any age from fifty to seventy, runway thin, a long red coat, hair dyed black and cut in a severe bob. She wore dark glasses, a lot of gold showed at neck and fingers. Red lipstick tinted a firm, thin mouth and her perfume was subtle, expensive. A Louis Vuitton purse hung from one shoulder. There was a general appearance of extreme affluence, absolute confidence and style that somehow declared the woman was French.

‘Sören Sigurdsson?’ The accent was indeed French. ‘I am Héloïse Gauthier. I have purchased, through an intermediary, some of your paintings. May I come in?’

Sören, aware that his mouth was open, swallowed, and nodded, opening the door wider. Héloïse Gauthier stepped in on high heels, glanced around the flat. Sören cringed. He had tried to brighten the place up, but it was rented and redecorating was not in the lease. It was top-floor shabby, and Justin sneered at it. His own flat, which Sören had never seen, was in a far better location. Sören felt, sometimes, like a sex-worker that Justin kept on the quiet, save there was no money involved.

Héloïse removed her glasses, revealing brilliant black eyes expertly shadowed and mascarred. There were lines around them and her mouth, but her skin was still firm. There was a fine, thin nose, faintly aquiline and though she would never have been classed as beautiful she possessed something: a charisma and fierce intelligence that was somehow more arresting.

‘Would you like some coffee?’ Sören asked. ‘Tea?’

‘*Merci*. Coffee. Black. No sugar.’ She sat down where he indicated, on the rather battered sofa, as he brought in two mugs. She took a polite sip.

‘Monsieur Sigurdsson, perhaps you wonder why I have visited you. Well I own two of your paintings and have been hoping very much you would be exhibiting — last year and this. Yet nothing.’ She gestured. ‘As I was in London, I decided to come and ask you why such a talent is not being shown. And now I am here —’ She glanced around the room. ‘I find it *incroyable* that one of the great artists of this age is living in what is almost a garret. That is rude,’ she admitted. ‘And one might expect artists to struggle, no? But I see no necessity for it.’

At these *incroyable* words from a stranger Sören found himself staring, and blinked. He said at last: ‘You have some of my paintings, you said?’

‘*Bien sûr*. I am no collector, but I do appreciate good art. In one of my houses, you take pride of place even over the Rembrandt my first husband purchased.’ She made a moue. ‘I am not a great fan of the Old Masters. Your art, well...is quite something other.’

‘I — thank you.’ Sören fought an uprush of tears that came with the gratitude. Whatever Justin might say, did say, here was this clearly wealthy and intelligent woman telling him she rated him above Rembrandt. He wished Justin were here to listen, even if this was simply flattery. Where the

hell was he, anyhow?

‘But no more?’ She arched pencilled brows. ‘One must ask: why.’

Sören fidgeted, stood up, and walked about the room. ‘Sometimes the...muse isn’t there, Madam Gauthier.’ He shrugged, picked up a pile of letters to give his hands something to do.

‘Ah? The artistic temperament?’ But there was no mockery in the words and none, when he looked at her sharply, her face. She sipped her coffee, met his eyes over the rim of the mug.

‘Exactly so.’ He thought of the ruined painting he had placed in the bin earlier.

‘One understands,’ she assured him. ‘But you have people waiting eagerly for anything you produce. I am only one of them.’

‘I don’t know,’ he flicked through the letters nervously. ‘I just don’t know when I’ll be able to paint anything again.’

‘*Quel dommage!*’ She flung up both hands. ‘Because this is not you, Monsieur Sigurdsson. This life. This place.’

‘Isn’t it?’ he said a little defensively. He *had* been relatively comfortable after his paintings sold, but then Justin, complaining that upcoming footballers were paid nothing like the Premier League stars, had coaxed (at first) then later bullied the money from him. (‘If you loved me you would...’) The car he was driving now represented one painting’s price, and then there were the designer clothes, the dental work, the permanent tans, the hairdresser, the gym...From a privileged background, Justin believed he deserved these things without having to earn them. He was quite content to let Sören pay and live in this — yes it *was* a garret, while he shone in the sunlight.

‘*Non,*’ she said decisively. ‘There is far more for you than this.’

He remembered a time when he wished he could think this, could imagine it. A smile wavered on his mouth, but it turned into a grimace.

‘Poverty is nothing to be ashamed of,’ he said steadily.

‘Ah, that is true enough, but with your talent, your *gift* there is no height to which you cannot rise.’ Her head cocked like an inquisitive raptor. ‘You are quite the find, Monsieur Sigurdsson. I find myself wondering what has killed the passion in you.’

He jumped. Letters slipped, spilled from his hand and he cursed in Icelandic. One of them settled near Héloïse’s beautifully shod foot and she leaned down to pick it up.

‘Ah,’ she exclaimed and cast him a look of considerable respect. ‘An invitation to *the* ball. It does not surprise me, however.’

The cryptic statement effectively banished all emotion save confusion. He looked at the letter. ‘That?’ He shook his head in bewilderment. ‘I thought it was some sort of scam.’

Her lips creased in amusement. ‘You are very young, are you not? And very remote from this world? All artists are, I suspect.’

‘No, Madam, I know a great deal about this world, I can assure you.’ He snapped it.

She propped her chin on one delicate hand. 'But only the bad, I suspect, and art is an escape, no?'

He nodded. It had certainly begun that way.

'Sören Sigurdsson, even *royalty* would give their right arm to be invited to *the ball*. And are they? Non.' She laughed, looking mischievous as a girl. 'Mr Lucien Steele only invites those he deems *worthy*.'

Intrigued, Sören sat down again. 'So this is real, not some...joke?'

Héloïse sobered abruptly.

'A joke, you would say? One must assume you have googled him?'

He flushed. 'Yes,' he admitted then dryly: For what it's worth. There's practically nothing about him.'

She shrugged, elegantly Gallic. 'Of course not. Mr Steele values his privacy. I have known him, oh! many years.'

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Sören was beginning to build a mental image of the mysterious Lucien Steele. Old, paunchy, going bald, fabulously rich, some illegality in his past. Now, settled into retirement, he effected a certain benevolent eccentricity.

'I can't go, of course,' he said. 'But why would he invite me?'

'He has some of your work as well. So. Why can you not go?'

'I...' He frowned. 'I don't know him, and flying to another country? The costume? It's just a little crazy.'

'Others will be going,' she said. 'Others much like yourself. And I will certainly be there. I am fortunate enough to be invited every year, and it is quite the sight, the Villa *en fête*. The costumes rival that of the Venice *Carnevale*.'

'Then they'd cost a fortune to hire,' Sören said flatly.

'But no, they are provided by Lucien for the evening. And after, well, you may spend a few days there, and be flown back.'

'What's it like, the villa Fiorini?' Sören was conscious of curiosity, a desire to step out of his world for a while and see what life was like for the mega-rich. Really, he wanted to know what Lucien Steele was like but could not quite bring himself to be that blunt.

'*C'est magnifique!* Very beautiful, lovely grounds, almost on the lake itself. Most romantic.'

It sounded idyllic and a far cry from here. 'Who else is going from the UK?' he asked. 'Is this like those charities that send deprived kids to Disneyland?'

'Lucien would not consider it charity,' the woman corrected. 'But something of a giving back,

something that is well-deserved. As to whom?’ She pursed her lips. ‘*Excusez-moi.*’ She withdrew a phone from her purse and rose. ‘Lucien, *mon chéri.*’ A laugh. ‘*Oui.*’ Then a flood of French that Sören could not follow, with more laughter and a definite teasing by the tone. ‘*Á bientôt!*’ she ended.

‘There are just four from the UK, including you,’ she said, her eyes still brilliant with the effects of the brief conversation. Sören thought: Lucien Steele might be old, but was clearly a charmer. There was some history between the two. ‘All told there will be about thirty or so guests, not so many. And he said to tell you that in May it is not unbearably hot at the lake.’

‘How the fu—hell would he know about that?’ Sören demanded. ‘That I’m uncomfortable in the heat?’

The woman shrugged. ‘No doubt you mentioned it to someone, a buyer, perhaps.’

It was possible, Sören supposed, although he was uncomfortable with the fact that whoever had heard it had passed it on, as if gathering information about him.

‘I’m sorry, it just seems very odd and not...’ He gestured. ‘Really safe. Flying off to a billionaire’s villa, maybe never coming back. Okay, I may watch too many films but at the least, I can’t afford to be stranded in Italy if anything goes tits up.’

Hélöise put down her mug. ‘Sören Sigurdsson, I have seen faces like yours before: people who have been wounded and are fragile inside. The damage does not heal so easily, never in fact. Are you familiar with the Japanese technique of...’ she waved her fingers. ‘Bah! the name escapes me.’

‘*Kintsugi?*’ Sören questioned. ‘Gold repair?’

‘Yes. You see, the damage is not all of you.’ She gathered her bag from the floor. ‘You cannot be forced to go, and Lucien would never do so, but you would not regret it if you did, *je vous assure.*’ She opened a purse and extracted a card. It was dull gold and black with simply her name, in italics and a number. ‘I remain in London until the 16th. If you change your mind, we can fly out together. I am going straight to the villa.’

Sören was left feeling unsettled. The flat seemed more than drab with the lingering scent of the woman’s expensive perfume; it felt empty. Her personality, her air of knowing absolutely who and what she was, had been *large*. It took up space, stamped itself on the surroundings. Such utter confidence was completely alien to Sören. He had been impressed by her, but did not like the fact that both she and the mysterious Mr. Steele seemed to know things about him that were certainly not in the public domain. Perhaps wealthy people were like that: they might buy art and think they owned the artist. That was a discomfiting thought.

The 18th...just a week away.

Sören tucked the card in his back pocket and decided to think no more about it.

Justin came back in the evening, walked in as if he owned the place, with no explanation. It was the beginning of six days of escalating temper. Justin could be pleased by nothing: Sören not painting, (although he was shit, so Justin was at least spared that) and then Sören tying hopelessly to pain. The food was shit, the flat was shit, Justin didn't know why he bothered coming here when Sören could do nothing for him.

Sören, snapping at last, shouted at him why did he not just *leave*, then?

'Right, right, so you can go to the tabloids and make money telling them Justin Robinson likes a piece of ass now and then? I don't think so. You're a little bitch, but you're *my* bitch, remember that.' He gripped Sören's jaw hard, painfully and a completely uncontrolled *jolt* of will flared from Sören's mind, so that Justin swore and released him, his own jaw clenched.

'What the *fuck*?' he yelled, wringing his hand. The ring he always wore, his 'lucky' ring, seemed to burn on his finger. It was plain as a wedding band, but worn on the right ring finger, rather than the left. Sören took little note of it usually, but — if the thought were not crazy — now it seemed to radiate a poisonous kind of light — . Then the thought was lost as Justin savagely backhanded him, grabbed him and pushed him onto the couch.

This was more than 'unwilling' sex, it was rape. Some people professed scepticism that when women were raped, they didn't struggle and fight, but froze. And that was exactly what Sören did. He was tall and slim, but Justin was a professional football player, and he used that strength and fitness now, to hurt. The pain, in fact was shocking, but Justin's arm choked his airway so that the pain was drowned in dancing spots, a darkening circle about his eyes. He thought he would die, and was not sure he cared and then, very suddenly it was over, and he was groaning, dragging in air, face half-buried in a cushion. He concentrated on the fabric smell, as he struggled for breath, heard Justin moving away, then his steps into the bedroom. They came back and Sören tensed.

'I'll be back in a while, little bitch. And if you're thinking of reporting this, think again. Who'd believe you? And if anyone did, I have friends who could make life very hard for you. And very *short*.'

Not long after the front door slammed. Sören might have laughed at the exaggerated menace, but he was hollowed out and shocked and could not. He recognised the feeling from other times. His passage felt scoured raw, and he knew he was bleeding, his whole body - and soul — felt bruised. And yet, he could not cry. Not yet.

Before he went to the shower, he nicked the deadbolt on the door, used his inhaler, and then washed — and washed, scrubbing his skin until its paleness flushed dark pink. He walked gingerly to his bedroom, pulled on a loose pair of pyjamas and only then gave way to angry, bitter tears.

There was no way he could sleep. He made himself a hot drink, turned on all the lights, which only illuminated the bare gloom of the rooms. He went back into the small lounge as one returns to a crime scene where one was the victim. It was. He was the victim. The sofa had been pushed back by Justin's violence, and something glinted on the floor. He bent stiffly, picked it up.

It looked like a compact, or the kind of mirror a women might carry in their purse, to flick open and touch up their lipstick. It was heavy, and decorated like a Tiffany lamp. Turning it over, he saw the old gold hallmark worn into the metal and he remembered Héloïse Gauthier placing her Vuitton bag on the floor. It must have fallen out then.

In his current mood, he thought that it would really be typical if the wealthy Héloïse reported it as missing and named him as the thief. He still had her card — if she was still in the UK. He glanced at his phone. Yes, she was supposed to be leaving tomorrow.

Suddenly, he saw an escape route open to him, if he dared to take it. He had told Justin nothing about the invitation to the ball, or the woman's visit. He knew he was running on adrenaline, on anger, on pure shock and pain, but he really believed, at this dark nadir, with the rain beginning outside, in this shabby little room, that Justin could control him if he stayed here, that he would become no more than those poor girls trafficked into the UK and imprisoned in houses for sex, beaten and drugged into terrified obedience. He tried to tell himself that was ridiculous. He did have family, scattered though they were, and at least one friend in London. Justin Roberts was a dangerous asshole, but not a criminal — or he was, he was a rapist, but as he had said, who would believe that he, a rising star who could get anyone he wanted, would force sex on a man?

He wiped his face, picked up his phone.

‘*Oui, allo?*’

Sören cleared his throat. ‘Ah, is this Héloïse Gauthier? This is Sören Sigurdsson. Sorry to bother you, but I was tidying up and found a mirror compact under the sofa. It's gold and —’

‘Ah, Sören, so good of you to call. Yes, the mirror. I can pick it up on my way to the airport. About an hour.’

‘That'll be fine.’ He swallowed.

Héloïse arrived in a deceptively casual pant-suit, a long silk scarf and an air of being pleasantly rushed. As if she were greeting an old acquaintance, she kissed both his cheeks, and then stood back. Her brows snapped together.

‘But what is wrong?’ She almost hustled him inside. ‘You are hurt, you have been crying. Oh, do not look away. *Je sais, je comprends..* Come, *mon bébé.*’

‘It's nothing,’ he insisted. ‘I had an argument with my partner...’ His voice became suspended.

The woman's black eyes became oddly bleak, cold and hard. ‘Justin Roberts. Yes, it is known he would keep you like a dirty little secret.’ Sören's eyes widened. ‘Money, my dear boy, buys information, but do not think of this as spying on you, but from interest and *care*. It is Roberts who holds the dirty secret. Ah, he is of the *canaille*, that one. No soul. No heart. *Scélérat!* You are too good for him. You are meant to *burn.*’

Sören shivered at that, as if a fire had indeed scorched itself up from somewhere deeper than his core, and flashed through his veins, risen into his flesh. Even his cheeks burned. The day was cool for May, but he felt feverish, suddenly. Héloïse nodded as if he had said something in agreement. ‘Now,’ she continued. ‘This is what we will do. You will come with me to Italy and to the ball. Just bring what is necessary, we can always pick up clothes later. Your medications, you must have those. We will deal with Justin Roberts after.’

She even knew about his medication. He shook his head in bewilderment.

‘Don't you see I *can't*?’

‘Are you telling me that when you phoned me you were not hoping for escape?’ she asked

shrewdly. ‘Sören Sigurdsson, have you heard the story of the man who was a devout Christian and who, when a great flood came, climbed on the roof of his house. A boat came by and the man told him to climb into it. He said *non*, he trusted in god to save him. Later, another came by and again he refused and still the water crept higher, to the very roof. At last a rescue helicopter flew overhead and would have lifted him to safety, but he called that god would save him. And still the water rose and night came and the man, still praying for god to save him, drowned in the dark. When he arrived in heaven he asked his god why his prayers went unanswered and his god said: “I did answer them. I sent two boats and a helicopter.”’ Sören had to smile at that. ‘I have little truck with most gods.’ Hëlóise flicked her fingers disdainfully. ‘But I have reason to believe that they sometimes act through people.’ She put out her thin, heavily-ringed hand. ‘You are offered an escape, Sören, before it is too late.’

The heat vanished as if in an icy draught. He remembered the horrific, blank look in Justin’s eyes, the toxic light that seemed to shine on his ‘lucky’ ring, or *from* it. Sören knew he could defend himself by use of the Force, but deliberately did not. He didn’t think he could control it, for one thing, and if Justin was found dead here, he would be charged with manslaughter at the least. The thought of prison, of being shut away horrified him. He felt a panic attack rising in his throat, dizzying his head. But he said:

‘I don’t know you. Not well enough to trust you, I’m sorry.’

‘Bah! How well have you known any of your lovers before allowing them intimacy? This is not you speaking, but fear. But this I promise, and I promise for Lucien as one who knows him well: There is *nothing* to fear. Quite the opposite.’

Sören’s phone flashed up a message. *Back in 15 minutes, hope you’re ready for me.*

Bile came up in his throat. He reacted like a horse under the spur, fighting a desire to throw the phone on the floor and stamp on it.

‘I’ll come,’ he said, feeling sick.

Starlight and Fire

~Starlight and Fire~

~ 'Can you drink with your medication, Sören?' Hëlóise asked as the Learjet took off and levelled into its flight path. The rain had blown over and gulfs of blue sky showed above London.

'Carefully,' Sören replied. 'But sometimes, yes.'

She eased the cork expertly from a bottle of chilled champagne. 'Then do join me.'

Sören accepted; the last time he had tasted champagne was when he sold his first painting at that tiny exhibition, unable either to believe someone had purchased it, or the sum they offered. The icy golden bubbles took him back to that moment, though the setting for them was quite different. It was something he never thought he would experience: champagne on a private jet. Luxurious, quiet, room to stretch his legs. How the 1% lived, he thought wryly. Crazy. And yet...he could not deny the sheer relief of flying away from Justin.

'Ah, *mon gars* that is better, there is a light in your eyes that was lacking in that flat.' Hëlóise stretched out her legs.

'This is insane.' But he smiled back at her.

'Is insanity such a bad thing? I saw that man's face as we drove away. That was pure malice.' She leaned back. 'You are well out of that.'

He nodded. He had seen it too.

'He wasn't like that when we met,' he said. 'Although in general, he's not my type at all.'

'Hmm, no, one can see *that*. These bland, overly physical men, they are not for you. You must have been in a dark place.'

'Yes,' he said baldly. 'I was.'

He found himself talking, as they flew. Perhaps the champagne unlocked his caution a little. Only a little; there were things he would never talk about unless he trusted a person and knew them well. There were many things he had never shared with Justin. Unlike Justin, Hëlóise was an excellent listener, sympathetic and thoughtful and yet he couldn't help thinking, later, that there had been no need for him to say anything, that she knew already.

He did not say outright that Justin had raped him, shrinking away from the pain of it, but when he had finished, looked out of the window to conceal the burn of tears, she said gently: 'Bodily wounds can heal, Sören, those to the mind, the soul, they leave scar tissue, as I have said before.'

He turned his head toward her, but she was staring toward the cockpit, eyes distant as if gazing at something far away. The skin between her fine brows puckered. Then she brought her eyes back to him. ‘You are not the sum of your griefs and what has been done to you, Sören. No-one is. There is that in you that will burn you free of it — and yet, never free, because you will never forget it, but it has not defeated you, nor broken you. You will emerge from the fires stronger.’

Her words struck him, and he regarded her curiously; he had googled her, in the hours after she first came to his flat. There was nothing secret or strange in her background, rather the opposite: her life had been lived in the blinding sun of privilege. She was a fabulously rich Frenchwoman who had been married three times and had something to do with diplomatic circles (Or had in the past) although her life seemed to consist mainly of travel, enjoyment of her vast wealth and presiding over several charities. She was famous in the way of the Rothschilds, or the Aga Khan, high-stepping above tabloid gossip and Instagram. But there seemed nothing shadowy about her. She was eccentric — perhaps in the way Lucien Steele was eccentric — but he thought, she was trustworthy. Her volubility was perhaps designed to do that, to put people at their ease while a mind like a razor dissected them from behind it. And to what end?

The sun glinted on the slim wings of the jet as they flew south through France. Sören found himself falling asleep, something he wouldn’t have expected. It was the relief, he knew, and the trauma of yesterday. He reclined the plush leather seat and let himself drift.

He was not asleep long; the flight was short and he woke to find Hëlóise telling him they were preparing to land. She had apparently covered him with a throw and the gesture touched him. He blinked and sat up, secured himself as the jet glided down into Milano Malpensa airport.

Hëlóise hustled them through the terminal to a taxi, saying she had left her own car at the villa. There was a dusky blue light coming down and there was that wonderful feeling of anticipation, of being in a different country. It was in the air, the scent, the light itself as much as the voices speaking in Italian. He thought, *God, I’m free. I’m really free of him.* It was not true, as Hëlóise had said he would never be free of what had been done to him, but here and now, he had taken the step of getting away from Justin. They were in different countries.

‘We’ll stay here tonight,’ she told him. She had booked rooms in a quiet and expensive hotel where the staff obviously knew her. They dined rather sumptuously before Sören went to bed in a suite that made his eyes widen. But he was so tired he simply showered and tumbled naked into the huge bed — and let sleep drown him.

He woke late, finding a text from Hëlóise saying to meet her On the dining room terrace at 1 o clock. Feeling conspicuous among such well-heeled people, he made his way there, and was greeted by a wave that made a couple of eyebrows climb to the hairline. Hëlóise, magnificently ignoring them as a lesser species, waited until he had drunk the first few sips of an excellent coffee and handed him the menu.

‘I thought you would like to sleep in,’ she said. ‘After the last few days — or months, or years.’

‘Years, yes,’ he said as the beverage began to work its revivifying magic. ‘God, it feels like millennia. Thanks, I’m not much of a morning person.’

‘Ah? Yes artists keep strange hours, do they not? Lucien is also not much of a one for sleep. And speaking of Lucien, I received a message that he has been called away on some business. But the ball will go forward. He should be back.’

‘Oh? I was rather interested to meet him.’ Sören was unsure if he felt disappointed or relieved.

‘I am sure you will.’

He turned the bone china cup on its saucer. 'I had the strangest dreams last night. I can't really believe I'm here.'

'One can be unsettled in a strange place,' she said. 'I have travelled so often I think of most of the world as home. Of what did you dream?'

He frowned. 'I think it was because you spoke about fire, burning, but I've had the dream before. I was burning, I could feel the heat, the agony, and anger...such anger...and...dying and...cursing the gods.'

She did not laugh. 'Ah. Well, some gods deserve cursing with one's last breath,' she said solemnly.

'You believe in gods?' he asked. 'Are you a pagan?'

She shrugged one shoulder. 'I have no religious affiliation, Sören. But yes, I believe there are many gods and most of them, my dear, are not worth your spit. Or mine.'

'You sound as if you know them personally,' Sören joked.

'A few,' she said, straight-faced. 'Only some are worth knowing. Now,' briskly, 'what shall you eat?'

The lunch was as delicious as the dinner the night before. They did not hurry it. It was pleasant on the terrace with the clink of cutlery, chiming glasses and soft conversation in (mainly) Italian but with a smattering of English and French.

They sat in a comfortable silence over another fresh coffee.

'I did look you up on google,' Sören admitted, having slaked his mild passion for fresh fruit and cream with a dish that was positively decadent, to which Hëlóise said mildly, 'Yes? I imagined you would. And so?'

'Nothing, really,' he said with an embarrassed smile. 'Except I still don't know why you would help me.'

'That is because you do not value yourself enough,' she said seriously. 'Now, I hope and Lucien hopes, that you, along with the other special guests will stay a few days. You need some clothes, and there is a men's boutique just down the street. Shall we have a look?'

Sören looked and mentally reeled at the prices but, as he shook his head and backed toward the door, the sales assistant, a very blonde, tanned young man who looked rather like Justin but proved to be a great deal more pleasant (perhaps because he was on commission) came across.

He greeted Hëlóise with an air kiss that nevertheless seemed genuine. The look he turned on Sören was frankly admiring and, after Justin's constant criticism, pleasant. While Sören had largely lost his desire for casual sex, he couldn't deny that to be on the receiving end of such obvious interest was flattering.

'Signor Sigurdsson is invited to the ball at Villa Fiorini, Matteo,' Hëlóise said. 'He will be staying a few days.'

The clothes in the shop were nothing like Sören would usually buy, but there were some well-cut black jeans and tee shirts, and eye-bogglingly expensive leather boots. Matteo exhibited some black silk pyjamas with a subtle deep red piping, silk socks and boxer shorts, and Hëlóise paid by

card.

‘Now, now,’ she said at Sören’s expostulations. ‘I am a very rich old woman, and this is nothing, nothing at all. I would have liked a son like you, so no more arguments. Now, we will have some coffee, yes, and then go to the villa.’

OooOooO

The Villa Fiorini was a dream, a jewel set on the blue shores of the beautiful lake. The woods and gardens plunged down the steep slopes in froths of green and colour as if eager to look upon the waters; tall spear-headed cypress stood proud as guards. A blue sky lay benevolently over all. Azaleas were in bloom, red, pink and white, around marble colonnades and pillars and antique statues. The house itself was of a pale white-gold stone, simple and elegant — and enormous. Sören first saw its roofs as the taxi turned off the main highway onto a smaller, steeper road. He dug his hands into the leather seat, assailed by sudden nerves. What was he *doing* here?

Or is this a dream within a dream?

The driver pulled up and, after payment, got out to open the boot and take out their luggage.

It was, when Sören got out of the car, very quiet. The sun was warm, but not hot, and a soft breeze rustled the cypress. A black and white cat, curled in a patch of sunlight, rose stretched and padded forward. Sören found the cat domesticated the scene, was reassuring, and stroked its back.

‘Come.’ Hëlóise drew Sören forward, up a shallow flight of steps and through large open double doors.

The hallway was a shimmer of gold and white marble, with a delicate fan of staircase leading up. Both stairs and hall were completely empty.

‘Lucien always gives most of the staff the day off before the ball,’ Hëlóise said, her heels clicking on the marble. ‘Only the caterers will be in the kitchens. Come. I’ll take you up to your suite.’

What struck Sören, as he climbed the stairs, was the space and light, the warm, comforting colours that promised tranquility and rest, and, as they turned along a hall, the stupendous view over the lake.

‘There is a buffet this evening,’ she said. ‘But that is some hours away. Would you like something now?’

‘Um...’ Sören whispered. ‘Grilled cheese?’ He grinned, suddenly a little reckless; it was his favourite food, and he in no way expected to eat it in this place. But Hëlóise laughed. ‘Grilled cheese? Why not? And what to drink?’

‘Appelsín,’ he laughed back at her. ‘I’m kidding!’

‘For all I know, there may be some,’ she smiled. ‘Lucien does like to cater for his guests. I will check.’ She opened a door on which, in richly curling italics was written: ‘Fire’ ‘Here is your suite.’

I will be back in a moment.'

'Wow.' He did not know what to expect from the 'Fire' suite, but it was not painted a garish red: the decor was as calm and tasteful as everything else he had seen. Long glass doors opened onto a wide balcony and that glorious blue-and-green view. There were sofas, chairs, a table, an open door leading into the bedroom with its huge bed and, as he revolved in the centre of it, he stopped dead. One pale wall was entirely taken up by a mural. An eight-pointed red star, or perhaps a stylised flower with eight petals shimmering like flame flung out burning arms. Sören stared at it, heart beating strangely fast. He knew this insignia, he had seen it somewhere....where, Deviant Art or...?

'Lucien painted it.' H el oise's voice broke into his preoccupation. He hadn't heard her come in. 'The bathroom is just through there.' She pointed. 'But you have leave those go anywhere. Except today.' She laid a hand on his arm. 'It is a tradition, you see, that no-one who comes to the ball meets anyone beforehand.'

'You're kidding me,' he said.

She laughed. 'It's only a little fun. But interesting too. When you cannot see someone's face but only react to how they are? Exciting, no?'

S oren had no idea. In Iceland, people were open, and in London too, or in some places. This was outside his experience, and yet he imagined beautiful people, their faces masked, whirling around a ballroom.

'Yes,' He agreed. 'Maybe.' He looked again at the mural. 'I know this from somewhere.'

'Yes? All the suites here are named after some theme: Fire, water, ice, the sun, the moon, stars, things like that.'

'And they all have murals like this?'

She nodded. 'I will show you, the guests are arriving soon, but I know Professor Dooku and the others from the UK are not here yet. Come, then you can eat.'

The suite was just along the corridor, commanding the same view as S oren's own. The decor was similar, save that there was an ice-blue tone to the colour, and the mural ...the mural was...

S oren felt the choking gasp come up in his throat with a wave of heat. If he mentally dubbed the mural in his room 'Fireflower', this one he thought of as 'Starflower'. Shades of blue and white, like a supernova exploding, but a suggestion of the strength of steel, too supporting the arms of the star in eternal defiance.

And then, climbing on top of the whirling emotions was a simple one: grief. His chest shook. Something lost, something gone, something precious, irreplaceable. And then, surmounting even that was fury, white-hot, red-hot. Fury with the implacability of an approaching meteor.

'S oren?' Through the blur of tears, H el oise's eyes questioned him.

'I don't know,' he said. 'I don't know. But...I *know* this.'

She lead him from the room back to his own. 'This is an ancient place,' she said pouring him a glass of water. 'There was a Roman house here once, it was excavated many years ago, and there are still some remains in the grounds. Then in the renaissance, a wealthy family built there. Some say there are ghosts here. Your mind is very sensitive, S oren, as an artist.'

He sipped the water. 'It's nothing like that, it's...something else.' Something known and loved —

and lost. *Gone, gone, gone.*

There was a knock at the door, and a servant entered with a tray. He was middle-aged, neat, and quiet.

‘Ah, Sören, eat your food,’ Hëlóise said briskly. ‘It will be time for the costumes soon. Come, some food will make you feel better. You have been in shock,’ she told him when the servant was gone. ‘You are suffering a delayed reaction.’

Yes, he thought, but to *what?*

The grilled cheese was delicious, comfort food at its best, and he ate, sipped the Appelsín — which Lucien Steele obviously did have in stock — and did feel a little better, steadier, if no less troubled. He was all-too familiar with the ungovernable emotions PTSD could inflict, but what he had felt looking at the ‘Starflower’ mural, and this one, was not quite the same.

Perhaps fortunately there was little time to think. Half an hour later, his room was invaded by the costumiers and fitters. He understood that this was part of the ball and the sheer theatricality appealed to him. As for the costumes themselves, if they had been bought from film sets he wouldn’t have been surprised. Hëlóise, who said that her own outfit had been chosen months ago, sat on an antique chair as the costumes were shown.

‘Ah!’ she exclaimed.

It was presented as a Highwayman’s outfit — a highwayman with an unashamed penchant for BDSM. There was black leather, cascades of lace, golden embroidery on the long coat, and glossy black boots. Sören whistled and retreated with a dresser to try it on. When he emerged, Hëlóise walked around him, smiling.

‘Perfect, don’t you think?’ She glanced around the costumiers who nodded emphatically. ‘The mask?’

If anything the mask was even more gorgeous than the outfit. It was light, but seemed perfectly moulded to his features and crowned with a spray of fire-red plumes that rose then cascaded down around his shoulders. It left the mouth clear for eating and drinking — or other things.

‘This one?’ she asked.

‘Oh yes,’ he laughed.

‘*Eh bien.* You have an hour to shower and change, Sören. The ball will begin at 7 o’clock, and you will hear the chimes announce it. It is—’ She gestured. ‘Held everywhere, all over the villa, The gardens will have lamps and fairy lights, so just go where you like. I am Madam de Pompadour if you need to ask me anything.’

‘What about Lucien Steele?’ He felt a prickling rush of nerves again.

‘I am sure he will be back, if not, he would still like the ball to continue.’ She waved and went out saying her own toilette took quite some time.

Sören showered, and as his hair dried he opened small bottles of blended perfumes on the dressing table, finding one that suited him. Then he dressed. The costume was ornate, but designed so that

the person wearing it could take it on and off without assistance.

Restless, nervous again, he went out onto the balcony, wondering if any of the guests were here yet. If they were, they were not in evidence. He gazed across the calm blue glimmer of the lake where, on the opposite shore, he could see other houses, a village, picturesque as a panting in the evening light.

A drift of movement in the garden below caught at the edge of his vision, and he glanced down. It was a man in dark robes with a long fall of hair silver as polished chrome. Rather than a mask, he wore a veil that fell from a circlet at his brow to below the throat. Fascinated, Sören leaned over the balcony. He had a bit of a *thing* (A penchant, as Hëlóise might say) for both long hair and grey hair, although one couldn't call that flood of polished silver grey.

The man, turning away down a path, lifted his head for a moment as if aware of Sören's regard, then vanished through a gap in the topiary. Sören repressed a smirk. Well, crazy as this situation was, it might turn out to be quite interesting. He wasn't quite comfortable, but he simply couldn't imagine that Hëlóise Gauthier was mixed up in any kind of criminal activity — although if she was, she would be clever enough to hide it and certainly had the money to. But he felt he could trust her and anyhow, it was too late now to do anything else. He straightened his shoulders, donned the mask and with a long breath and a look back at the fiery mural, stepped out of the suite. Doing something, being here, was better than brooding in that bare top-floor flat, waiting for Justin...

He shivered. *Someone walked over my grave.* He shook himself free of the sensation, lifted his chin and descended the sweeping stairs.

The other guests must have been arriving all afternoon. From the top of the stairs he could hear music not, as he half-expected, an orchestra, but dance music. He followed it to an huge ballroom with doors and windows opening into a long balcony. Beyond lay the gardens. C

There were perhaps fifteen or so people there, sipping champagne, circulating, dancing. The costumes seemed to follow no particular theme, anything from steampunk to film and a truly impressive sun god with a full-face mask topped by a coronal of fire that added to his height. The rest of him was well worth looking at as well, with endless, shapely legs under a short tunic that showed his tautly muscled torso. His mask, Sören thought was incredible, until he saw, with something like shock, the sun-god smile a little and realised it was not a mask, that his face was painted with glittering gold, kohl lining eyes of fiery bronze.

He was talking to the personification of winter, whose wig of glassy white hair poured to his knees like an avalanche down a mountain slope. Sören thought of the long-haired guest he had seen earlier, but his hair had most definitely been silver, whereas this man's was like milk-glass, strangely translucent. No, it was not the same person; this costume was quite different. The headdress was silver-white, as was his mask and costume, white leather that hugged his lean and lofty frame, a belt holding the hilts of knives that moved with his slim hips as he turned away, walking with a predatory sway.

Despite his nerves, Sören felt, as he had not in too long, the pulse of sexual interest. One of the staff offered him a drink from a tray of champagne glasses misted with frost, and he accepted, felt the bubbles fizz inside him as he looked around. After the flat in London, the grey miasma of depression and jagged desperation, his eyes delighted in this display. The rhythm of the dance music throbbed in time with his heart, begging him to dance, and perhaps he would, soon.

For the moment though, the costumes were engaging all his attention. There was a very tall man standing against some long red velvet drapes. He had chosen 'Count Dracula', and he looked the part; the absurdity of the old Hammer Horror film costumes tailored into something elegant and aloof. His white mask was austere, shockingly dashed with droplets of painted blood. His long-bodied frame wore the clothes beautifully and a thick mass of silvery-grey hair was bushed back from his face. Sören flashed him a brief smile and the man registered it, gave a brief nod of the head.

Two women walked past. One had to be Hëlóise, in *La Pompadour* toilette, white-wigged, shimmering rose and ivory silk over an immense, hooped skirt, waving a fan. She raised a gloved hand at Sören, painted lips curving in a welcoming smile. Her companion could not have provided a greater contrast, and more than one head was turned appreciatively toward her as she moved to accept a glass of champagne. Her hair was light, almost platinum, braided and wrapped around her head, exposing the lovely line of her neck. She looked like a Greek statue who had been breathed into life and colour. A long emerald dress clung to her slenderness as if moulded there, leaving the arms bare and falling in graceful folds to her sandalled feet. A necklace of deep green stones circled her neck and banded one arm, glowed on a finger. Her mask was the same delicate ivory as her skin, edged with tiny emeralds. A small purse was held in one hand. She was, beside Sören, one of the only guests who did not sport wigs.

There seemed a superabundance of wigs here, and Sören did not mean that which Hëlóise wore, or the Carolingian curls of Louis IVX, but wigs that flowed incredibly long and thick, drawn back with braids, mounted by delicate circles, or interwoven with gems. In fact there were only six of them, all men, (and not, so far, the man he had seen earlier) but they were all so tall that they seemed to dominate the room.

The Sun God and the Winter King were obviously representations, but the others were dressed as warriors or knights. Sören couldn't place the time period or the armour, and was not sure for a while if it even was armour, until one of them passed close to him. Strips of silver steel across the jupon, but the chain mail below was of tiny scales that looked cloth-soft. Insignias were worked into the metal at the shoulder: A field of stars, a harp set within a wheel of flame (like the mural in his room) another harp but its strings holding three glittering gems. Triple braids drew their hair back over a cascade that reached their knees: black and black and a glimmering bronze. Masks were moulded to haughty faces. Fantasy armour, he guessed, although no fantasy he was familiar with. Suddenly, a hot heartbeat that rose in his throat, pulsed in his ears and he was afraid he was going to panic. Turning away, he made for the balcony.

There was no-one out here, and as he walked along its pillared length, the voices grew fainter. He drank some champagne, set the glass down and took a few deep breaths as the sun spangled the lake into glittering fire.

'Are you all right?' asked a woman's voice. He looked around to find the Greek Goddess watching him. Her accent was English, not London though. There was just a hint of somewhere further north, gentle and attractive. Her eyes were grey, long-lashed and her smile, below the mask was sweet.

'Fine thank you,' he said. 'Sometimes I just get a bit claustrophobic.'

'Oh, I'm sorry. Yes, I know that feeling. Would you rather be alone?'

'No,' he said instantly. 'I didn't mean that. This is just a bit overpowering.' He gestured back into the 'ballroom'.

Her eyes creased, twinkling. 'Isn't it, though? I've only ever seen costumes like this on a film set,

or the theatre.'

He said curiously: 'Hélóise said some people were coming from the UK?'

'Yes, I'm one of them,' she agreed. 'Are you?'

'Well, I live there at the moment, but I'm Icelandic.'

'Oh, yes, I thought your accent was Scandinavian.' She turned to look out over the lake. 'It's like a dream, isn't it?' The sunset light gave her platinum curls a rosy sheen. 'We only flew in today, and were whisked here in a stretched limo! All a bit "Cinderella".'

'I know what you mean. You...your dress is beautiful,' he said with complete sincerity and she smiled.

'Thank you. It's a Fortuny. They're vintage,' she explained. 'And incredibly rare and expensive. It's exactly what I would have chosen though.'

'It really suits you.'

'Thank you, and yours is very...interesting.' They burst out laughing.

'I know it looks like a kinky highwaymen.' He struck a pose. 'I couldn't resist.'

'It looks good,' she assured him, tilting her head. 'Sexy, rather dangerous, flamboyant.'

He felt himself blushing. 'Thank you.' And hurried on: 'You weren't er...worried about coming here?'

'Were you?' She sounded surprised.

'I bit,' he admitted. 'Do you know him then, this Lucien Steele?'

'I don't know him personally, no, but his company is known. I'm a barrister,' she said. 'And in London I have to go to a lot of networking meetings and events, you know, where the *real* money is.' He nodded. 'Well, that's how I know about Apollyon Enterprises and the mysterious Mr. Steele.'

'There's not even a picture of him on google,' Sören leaned on the marble baluster.

'I know. He's very private apparently. Makes a change, doesn't it?' She joined him. A delicate perfume like the first days of summer drifted from her and mingled with the evening. 'Oh, I'm Claire, by the way, Claire James.'

'Sören Sigurdsson.' They shook hands and laughed at the formality.

'My invitation actually came to the chambers,' she continued. 'Not my flat, and a colleague saw it when I opened it.' She gave a mischievous little giggle. 'The envy was through the *roof*. Of course there were people who said it should have been them chosen.'

'I bet.'

'Oh yes, you know, the public school types.' Her hands tightened on the marble. 'But as I was invited, I had to come. This is networking, in a way, though it doesn't feel like it. I'm invited to stay until the end of the week. I wish...'

'Yes?'

'That I didn't have to go back.'

'You don't like your job,' he stated and saw a glimmer in the grey eyes as she looked at him. She began to walk; her long skirt brushed down shallow steps into gardens.

'I thought it was my vocation,' she said with a glance back. 'Or maybe I wanted to think that. I worked hard for it, and I'm good at it, but no, I don't like it, now. I haven't for longer than I want to admit. But being here, seeing this, another country, a different life...' She shrugged slim shoulders. 'I've always wanted to travel, to be *free* to travel, rather, not just fitting a couple of rushed weeks in a year and always dreading going back to work. Taking work with me, even.' She shook her head as if to toss the thoughts away. 'What do you do?'

'I'm an artist,' he said as they stepped down among the flowers. 'Or was. I've lost the passion for it. But apparently Lucien Steel has a couple of my paintings, which is why I was invited. But look, can't you do something else?' She was too slender, as if fretted by constant nerves, and not of this place, this ball; by the stress of her profession.

'I suppose everyone can do something else,' she said wryly. 'It just feels like giving up.'

He considered Justin and how, when Sören gave up on their relationship there had been such relief. He should never have allowed Justin back into his life. But didn't abused partners often do that, and didn't they often claim they were not abused, or that it was their fault? Yet he had known he was abused, known it was *not* his fault, and had still lacked the strength to fend off Justin's reconciliation. At this distance from him, and after the rape, he wondered at himself, but he had felt lonely, unloved. Justin was familiar and (at least it seemed then) the only person who wanted him. 'Sometimes it causes less damage to give up,' he said, grimacing. 'Less damage to ourselves.' And that was a lesson he hadn't learned until now. Claire regarded him in silence, then sighed. 'Well, I'm not getting any networking done,' she said. 'I haven't even met our host yet, and these gardens are so gorgeous, I hope I get a change to look at them. Maybe tomorrow.'

'Hélóise said he was on some urgent business.' Sören looked back, beside and above the villa, the great cypress' marched upward like sentinels toward the glowing sky.

'Yes, she told me, but thought he might be back.' Claire did not immediately turn back, as if the gardens drew her. She went on a little way, turned a corner, where a pillared balcony fringed the water. She stopped. A statue stood there, life-size or a little more and this was no relict of a Roman past, but seemed almost new. Chiselled from marble, it was a man or...no, *No, I've drawn this, people like this...*

A King. His armour was not unlike the strange fantasy armour he had seen in the ballroom. He stood in an attitude of defiance, sword raised, and on his helmed brow a circlet of three gems were faceted like diamonds. His hair seemed caught by an invisible wind, blowing out in great waves that fell past his knees, and his face was lifted — that face...the sculptor had caught something incredible there. It was the face of a god going into his last battle.

'Wow,' Claire said faintly. 'That's...'

'Yes...'

Sören's eye was snagged by a movement on the pathway, approaching through the scented greenery. The man with the silver wig. Sören wasn't sure what he was supposed to be dressed as: long robes of blue-black billowed around him, but under it his slim figure wore a deep green tunic, fawn-coloured breeches and boots. His veil, which Sören had earlier imagined was cloth, rustled and moved as if woven out of metal. A great fiery gem, possibly an enormous opal, was set above his brow; the colours seethed in the deepening light.

‘Excuse me, I think you dropped this?’ His voice was cool and mellow as spring, but there was something behind it, some strength, a force like a glacier.

‘Oh, my purse!’ Claire exclaimed and, as the men did not move, she went toward him while Sören, for no reason, felt that return of panic, his heart coming up in his throat.

‘Thank you,’ she said. ‘I quite thought it would be safe, to be honest.’

‘I am sure it would be,’ the veiled man agreed. ‘But...’ He shrugged.

She took the purse. ‘It was very kind of you to bother.’

‘You are most welcome, Claire.’ The veil rustled as he inclined his head, then turned it to Sören, who was unnerved as he *felt* the weight of the man’s eyes without being able to see them. ‘You like the statue? There are a few others like this in the gardens.’

‘I’d love to see them,’ Claire said impulsively.

‘There is another just along here,’ the man said and lead the way through an arbour where roses were budding. This one was very similar to the first: a king rising off one knee as if to strike at an unseen foe, face uplifted, a look on his face of fierce resolution; a man with nothing left to lose. Beautiful, indomitable Sören stared at it a long moment, stomach fluttering.

‘Who do they represent?’ he asked breathlessly, fearing an asthma attack was coming on. ‘Do you know?’

‘Kings, princes, warriors...a lost race?’ their guide said, then: ‘Are you all right?’

Sören dug into the coat pocket for his inhaler. ‘Fine,’ he said. But he was not, and Claire knew it by her expression.

‘Maybe we shouldn’t walk any further,’ she said. ‘You should sit down a moment. There’s plenty of time to see the others.’

‘Of course,’ the man said, and he turned as if to walk away.

Sören said impulsively: ‘Are *you* Lucien Steele?’ And the next moment flushed as the man stopped, looked back. The veil rang like soft rain.

‘I thought the idea of a masked ball was not to know a person’s identity?’ He sounded a little amused. ‘But no, I am not.’

Claire laid a hand on Sören’s arm. ‘Sorry, But both of us wish to see him to thank him.’

‘And I am sure you will. Have a good evening, Claire, Sören.’ His robes caught the breeze, swirled and fell as he lifted a hand and passed back through the curtain of green, vanishing into the gardens.

‘One down, thirty-odd to go,’ Claire said as they went back up the steps onto the colonnade. ‘Odd though. He knew my name? Do you think there’s a guest list or something?’

‘I thought you’d met him before.’ She shook her head. ‘And he knew *my* name, too.’

‘I suppose there must be a list somewhere,’ Claire said, but sounding unconvinced. ‘Anyhow, he wasn’t Lucien Steele. He could be any one of these masked guests. Perhaps I’ll ask Hëlóise. I feel I did ought to thank him in person.’ They walked slowly up the path toward the house.

‘Well, I doubt he’s one of these,’ Sören said. ‘I don’t know why I asked him. Hëlóise says she’s

known Lucien Steele a long time, so he must be at least as old as she is.' Perhaps the man in the Dracula outfit?

Claire loosed the warm little giggle again. 'Oh, yes, I've been having 'Godfather' images ever since I got the invitation.' She looked at him. 'Are you okay now? How long are you here for?'

He shook his head. He had no idea and certainly couldn't afford the air fare back to London — even the cheapest flight, although he did not want to admit his poverty. 'I'm honestly not sure.'

'The Learjet flight to Heathrow is on Friday,' she said. 'All the UK people are going back on it. We've all been invited to stay a few days. You were booked on the same flight as me and the others, but you came early. But I'm sure the invitation applies to you, too.'

'Yes, I came yesterday.'

Well, Sören, it was nice to see you.' They stepped up onto the long colonnade. 'Oh, there's Hëlóise. Hopefully I'll see you again this evening. I think the buffet is soon.' She smiled and walked off across the room, toward where Hëlóise Gauthier held court as La Pomadour might have.

In fact, there was an announcement for the buffet a few minutes later, and people began to drift from the ballroom into an adjoining chamber.

Sören found himself beside Claire as she served herself with smoked salmon. There were chairs and tables for those who wished to sit down and the menu seemed chosen to avoid food spills down those gorgeous costumes. Finding himself hungry and thirsty, Sören filled a plate, took a long drink of something fizzy orange and cold, and sat beside Claire as if it were the most natural thing in the world. She ate, he noted, as one who enjoyed her food but felt guilty at doing so. There were thin strips of buttered bread with her smoked salmon and she nibbled at them.

Sören himself had chosen a smoking-hot, freshly cooked pizza, and a bowl of strawberries drowned in cream. She looked at him enviously.

'Clearly you're don't need to watch your weight,' she sighed. 'But this salmon is gorgeous. It almost feels like Mr. Steele knows exactly what we like to eat.'

'Maybe he does,' Sören took a drink. 'But you don't need to watch your weight, Claire.'

Even with the mask, he saw her features tighten. 'Nor would you if you starved yourself.' She froze, and an unbearable look of devastation came into her eyes, as if she had admitted something to him.

'God, don't do *that*.' He put out a hand. 'Please. It damages your bones and anyhow, you'd look beautiful whatever size or shape you were.'

She grabbed at a napkin and blinked into it. 'You're kind,' she said. 'But you know it's not like that for women, probably not for men, either. I couldn't have worn this dress if I hadn't starved the past years. It's built for a slim woman.'

'I was thinking of the Venus de Milo,' she told her. 'What makes women beautiful changes all the time. But,' he took a breath. 'You do need to change your job, Claire, if it's doing this to you.'

She looked down, forking her salmon carefully as if determined to enjoy it. 'What made you lose your ability to paint?'

'Ouch,' he responded, but it seemed this was the time for honesty. 'All right. It was my partner. He...hated my art, thought it was useless.'

She glanced up. ‘Yes, I thought you were gay.’

‘Pan, really, I suppose.’

‘I see,’ she nodded.

‘But while I was with *him*, well, I lost..’ He shrugged. ‘Are you...?’

‘No,’ she smiled. ‘There’s no time. And the people I meet, well...I have a certain type I’m attracted to. Trite, really: tall, dark, handsome and, well...hurt, some kind of past. That sounds awful, as if I think I can fix broken things.’

‘Was your last boyfriend— girlfriend? like that?’

‘No, not that there was anyone serious. No heartbreak. Anyhow, if Lucien Steele bought some of your paintings, your ex is obviously the one with no taste.’

‘It would be nice to think so. He’s a footballer.’

‘Oh? Famous?’

‘He’d like to be,’ Sören said dryly. ‘His name’s Justin Roberts. Officially, he’s not out as gay.’

‘Never heard of him,’ Claire shrugged. The soft light glanced off her creamy shoulders.

Sören was delighted. He laughed. ‘Oh, he’d hate that. But really, you’ve not heard of him? He’s an up and coming star; there’s rumours Chelsea will sign him maybe next season.’

She shook her head, twinkling. Sören thought that her natural state was one of warmth and optimism and kindness but the cracks ran through it like chasms that would widen and drain her spirit.

‘Believe me,’ she said. ‘There are some people I know who talk football for hours on end.’ Then she sobered. ‘And you say he’s not out? Didn’t you ever go on dates or anything?’

‘No. Rarely. Only with a crowd and I hated his kind of people. You know the kind, toxic masculine bullshit? Posturing and boating? It was easier not to in the end. And when I met him I was working on art and kept unsociable hours. So it didn’t seem to matter.’

She touched his hand. ‘It does matter, Sören.’ Her lips firmed in disapproval. ‘You’re worth a lot more than that.’ She waved her hand. ‘Well, *you’re* here, and *he* isn’t.’

‘And so are you.’

They finished their food in a friendly silence and didn’t immediately go back to the ballroom, but wandered around the villa. It was as Hëlóise had said: there were only a few guests, most of the rooms and corridors were empty.

They pushed open a door that stood slightly ajar and found themselves in a room smaller than the grand ballroom, but with an air of being, as Claire said, a ‘*favourite*’ room. Sören could see what she meant. Although beautifully furnished in warm colours, it was not formal. There were bookcases, a few lovely *objets d’art*...one table held a great black glass sphere, its surface seemed almost to swirl with silver and gold drifts. Sören touched it with a finger, and could have sworn it was warm, as if it had soaked up sunlight or stood before a fire. His fingertips prickled and his heart began that odd, panicked bounding again.

'Oh,' Claire exclaimed. 'Look!'

Sören turned, followed her gaze and stopped dead, staring at the painting that hung over the empty fireplace.

He said slowly: 'I called it, The Unconquered.'

The background was a huge mountain rising to a peak which looked half fashioned by hand, monstrous pillars around a gaping mouth. Above it, in a black sky was the constellation of Orion brilliant as a warning.

The foreground was snow; moonlight gleamed like a benediction on figures walking, as if leaving the shadows of that colossal mountain. They were dressed in dark clothes, carried weapons, but their faces and hair were a glassy white, as were their eyes. Their leader strode like a king, all long legs and a blowing cloud of hair, and he was as beautiful and as lethal as winter in a land without shelter. But something had happened to him, one could see, some colossal pain and torment that he now walked away from but would never leave behind. And that look was stamped on all their faces. There were twenty of them, half were men, half women, dangerous, fey, indomitable.

Claire had a hand at her mouth. She lowered it slowly, said, 'Is this...from a film, a book?'

'Nothing like that. When I paint, sometimes I don't even begin with an idea, but then something happens, like a window opening in my mind... so I try to recreate what I see through that window.'

'It's incredible. I only ask because I've seen it before somewhere, I'm sure...And did you see the guest with the white wig?' He nodded. 'Apart from the colour of the clothes, he could be their leader.' She fell silent, staring up at the painting. Then: 'It looks so real, *they* look so real. *Where* do I know this from?' Suddenly she shivered and when she looked at him, her eyes were glossy, hard, pale, as if they had taken some of the whiteness from the figures in the painting. 'There's such a feeling to this, I'm so...enraged for them, for what they have endured. And so *hurt* for them. It's all in their eyes, the way they move. I don't know how you managed to paint all that, but it's there.'

'Thank you,' he said simply, although the picture had evoked the same emotions in him when he came out of the 'zone' to criticise it. 'I know what you mean. It felt like that when I was painting it. There's a story behind this, but not from any book I ever read, or any film I saw. It was...disturbing,' to put it lightly. 'to paint this.'

'I'm sure it was,' she said after a moment. 'You know, whether Lucien Steele is here or not, he obviously wanted you to know he valued this. This is a room where he relaxes.'

He smiled at her gratefully. 'I wonder where the other is? I never even knew he bought it. It went to someone called...Howard someone-or-other.'

'Mr. Steele's very private,' she reminded him. 'He probably always buys through intermediaries. What was the other painting?'

'I named it Lightfall,' he murmured and then turned as something caught the corner of his eye, someone walking past the door, darkness, then a shimmer of silver. But there was no footfall. He thought about what H  l  ise said, that the villa was haunted then scoffed at himself. Nevertheless he was already at the door, looking around. The lovely hall was empty save for a pulse of music from the ballroom.

'I wonder if it's here, or one of his other houses? I'd love to see it.' Claire joined him.

‘Well, if I ever meet him, I’ll ask him,’ he said.

Claire said she must find one of the many bathrooms before going back into the party and Sören smiled after her graceful walk. The hall was dimly-lit, only from the open ballroom spilled golden light, the murmur of voices, the fading bars of a song. He turned back, and found himself confronted by a very tall man dressed in black leather, breeches, boots, a short tunic that bared barbaric black tattoos on his arms. His approach had been utterly silent, like a cat’s soft tread. *Perhaps everyone’s a ghost in this damned place.*

The costume was hard to determine: what he looked like was a superlatively dangerously warrior, which was perhaps what it was supposed to convey. The hilts of twin swords rose behind his back. His wig was pulled up and back in a high tail that fell to his thighs in a storm of glossy black. The mask was silver, etched with delicate black designs and his contact-lenses were a dark, shining purple.

He bowed elegantly, a gesture that did not look ridiculous but, for him, completely natural, and music began again, this time: Mr. Vain by Culture Beat. Maybe there were speakers in the hall, too. The man blazed a smile at Sören, a clear invitation.

Sören tilted his head, smiled back and they fell into a dance routine as if they had choreographed it for months beforehand. Swords or no, the man could certainly move, and there was an odd rapport in the way they seemed to mesh. Sören felt as if he must have done this before, and with this man. The thought was absurd, but this entire experience was strange.

He turned at one point and saw Claire approaching, her lips smiling and, as one, they turned their dancing on her, and if giving her a private performance. Her smile turned to genuine laughter, and when the track came to an end, she curtsied and clapped her hands.

‘Bravo!’

The man, smiling, leaned in to Sören and said, ‘Thank you,’ close to his ear. His voice was smoky-rich, the accent (possibly) Russian. His scent was something rich and dark, sandalwood and the husky-clean scent of new suede. His full mouth just grazed Sören’s cheek, then he moved away, took one of Claire’s hands and bowed over it. ‘Thank you, lady.’

Without further words he turned away making, not for the ballroom, but the stairs, and Sören watched the long legs, the neat curves of his rear until he was gone. He was half-hard under his breeches. The man walked as if he were striding to war.

‘Well,’ Claire said. ‘This evening is full of the most unexpected things.’

‘I’ll second that.’

Feeling slightly dazed, slightly dazzled, Sören accompanied Claire into the ballroom. Heads turned, inclined in what — if it had not seemed ridiculous — were bows of respect. After a moment, the music began again, but this was a waltz. Before Sören could laugh and shrug, since it didn’t sound incongruous, or not here, he felt a light tap on his shoulder and looked around into a pair of eyes that shone almost silver for a moment, a reflection perhaps, glancing off a mirror. It was one of the warriors, the one with the insignia of the Fireflower-and-harp. The man bowed, extended a hand.

‘I don’t know how to waltz,’ Sören blurted, pinned by those incredible eyes.

‘Then allow me to show you,’ the man suggested, his voice mellow and deep as firelight on velvet but with a vein of pure steel through its melody.

Any self-consciousness Sören felt was incinerated by the feel of the man's hands guiding him. They were not intrusive nor heavy, and they brought a heated flutter up into Sören's stomach just as the man with the violet eyes had done, as Claire had done. He didn't mind them inside his boundaries, he realised, even though they were strangers. After a time, he felt only the exhilaration of whirling around the huge floor; he saw other couples, Claire with The Sun God, then the Winter King. The bronze haired warrior danced with the other black haired one, and the one who bore the fire-and harp insignia with 'Dracula'. Then in beautifully co-ordinated moves, they swapped partners. Sören felt the man's lingering grip on his fingers loosen like a caress, and then he was dancing with 'Dracula'. By now, feeling more confident, and something more, *bolder*, as if flinging all caution to the winds, he said, 'I absolutely love your outfit.'

The man showed strong white (and fangless) teeth in a smile.

'Allow me to compliment you on your own,' he returned in a well-bred English voice, deep and sure.

'Thank you, it's my historical BDSM look,' he laughed and thought the man's pale complexion, or what he could see of it, tinted red, but then he laughed too.

'Is there, you know, a general unmasking at midnight or something?' Sören asked.

'I'm not sure, do you want there to be?'

They whirled. 'Oh yes, I do like to see my partner's faces.' He said it straight faced, but then winked. 'Sometimes.'

He knew what clubs could be like, especially when the senses were heightened by drugs or alcohol, but here and now he began to feel the familiar devil-may-care exuberance with nothing but half a glass of champagne as he spun to the Sun God, whose gold-painted face glowed down at him, and then the Winter King, whose own face was polished silver and whose eyes were so pale they were almost white, with glints in them like sunrise across fresh snowfall. A shock struck him to the bone. *I know you*. The smile into his eyes was, by contrast, warm, as if Sören were an old friend or something closer even than that. He was wearing some subtle cologne that seemed to bypass the nose and react directly on Sören's senses like a hot wire. Before he could say anything, the Winter King spun away and there was Claire warm and pliant, her grey eyes brilliant as they reflected his own strange, half-enchanted mood. She gracefully twirled off into the harp-warriors arms, and now Sören was partnered by the bronze-haired man whose eyes burned a familiar, shocking silver, and next the warrior with the star field emblem, and back again to Count Dracula...

When the waltz ended, Sören thanked them all and thought, *I must have pictures, or I'll never believe this happened*. Excusing himself, he went upstairs, the long corridors cool and quiet, and into his room. The bed was made, a few lamps on low. His phone was on a side-table, next to it, the mirror-compact he thought he had given back to Hëlóise. He picked both up, went out, and met Hëlóise ascending the stairs.

'Well, Sören Sigurdsson,' she said, friendly. 'It is good to see you are enjoying yourself. Is there anything you need?'

'I was going to get my phone, or is taking pictures inappropriate? But also I found this.' He held out the mirror.

'There is no rule against taking pictures for your own use, Sören, as long as the people are happy for you to do so. The mirror?' Slowly. 'Hmm. Where did you find it?'

'Next to my phone, in my suite.'

'My father bought that when he was a young man, a present for my mother,' she said reminiscently. 'She passed it onto me. Neither of us could open it. I hardly know why I carry it around.' She glanced over her shoulder, up the stairs. 'It's an odd thing. It can go missing for months at a time, and turn up in quite unexpected places.'

Intrigued, Sören examined it, looking for indentations, anything that might be pressed or unscrewed. There was a seam, so clearly it was made to be opened.

In the centre of the lid was a grouping of three gems, diamond-white. He passed his thumb over them...and the lid clicked faintly, sprang open.

There was a mirror in both halves and that was it.

Hélóise laughed. 'You are only the second person to have ever opened it. Keep it.' She tapped his arm with her fan. 'A gift to remember me by.' She flashed a smile and went on up the stairs, skirts swishing.

'It's far too valuable,' he called after her.

'Bah, nonsense!' Came back down.

He put it in one of the capacious pockets of his coat. He would return it later. It was a beautiful object, an antique, but what need had he of a mirror? The phone now...he had a sudden urge to send a selfie to Justin, pictures of this villa and the people who were so far out of Justin's league it was laughable. There was more than a suggestion of 'Fuck you,' in the idea. This was just the kind of party and company Justin yearned to belong to. He would have bragged about it for months, had he been invited. ('My friend, Lucien Steele, the multi-billionaire, you know...')

He went through the ballroom, out onto the balcony where he found his erstwhile partners.

'Hey,' he said, now a little self-conscious as they looked around at him. 'Do you mind me taking pictures? It's something I want to remember.'

Urns spilled flowers, a breeze drifted from the lake bringing the scent of jasmine from the gardens. There were lamps here and there, hanging and standing and a full moon breathed a ghost-path over the water where, across the lake, lights glimmered.

'Of course,' said the knight of the harp and the others nodded. The Sun God took a picture of all of them, and then yielded his place to the Winter King. There was more than enough light for the camera. Sören thanked them, and flicked through the images.

'I'm going to send a few to my ex,' he said to Claire. In fact he had been expecting a threatening text, or several, from Justin, but there was nothing; he thought that Sören ought to make the first move, obviously. *Well, I might, just not the one you want, asshole.*

Claire's eyes glinted. 'Oh yes, do.'

But...there was no Justin Roberts in either contacts or favourites. He felt deflated; had he deleted the contact in those awful hours after the rape? But he was sure he had not. He had not been drinking, had been shocked and in pain, but his head had been clear enough. Too clear.

'Well, that's weird,' he murmured. 'His number's not on here now.'

'You didn't delete it?' Claire asked.

'I've been wondering if I did, but no, I'm sure I didn't.' But suddenly, he *wasn't* sure. 'I left the phone in my room, but no-one would go in and delete anything...would they?'

'I'm sure not, Sören,' she reassured him. 'You probably did, and were tired or something and don't remember. Best thing, if you ask me, he sounds like a horror.'

'You're right and he was.' He smiled. But...

'Forget him,' she urged. 'As they say, the night is young.'

'The night is young,' said the knight of the harp. 'And beautiful.'

'Full of stars,' said the knight with the stars as his emblem.

'And fire.' The bronze-haired warrior ended.

Their words chased a hot brush up Sören's spine. They were looking at him, all of them, eyes startlingly brilliant, as if they would eat him alive. Strangely, there was nothing disturbing in the thought. In their light, the crouching shadow of Justin retreated into the dark.

Smiling, Sören put out a hand. 'Well,' he smiled, giving himself up to the magic. 'Shall we dance?'

OooOooO

'I suppose now you will tell me what all this was about.' Hëlóise turned her head from the garden, strung with gentle fairy-lights

Vanimórë had removed his mask now, but the outfit remained. On-and-off he had spent years on this world and other very similar, but still he felt most at ease in the kind of clothes he had worn all his life.

He smiled at her. 'I intend to, my dear Hëlóise.' For a moment, he watched Sören and his dancing partners go into the gardens until they were hidden among the greenery. 'Justin Roberts would have killed Sören.'

She nodded grimly. 'From what you have told me of him, I am not surprised.'

He leaned one hip against the baluster. 'There are many realities. Some are as close as a shadow away, and the ones closest are almost indistinguishable; there might be a tree that does not exist, a rock, a patch of moss on a wall. The further away they diverge the less familiar they are.'

'I have heard of this,' she agreed. 'Not the sort of fact one can check, however. Or, perhaps *you* can?'

He raised his brows at her, half-teasing. 'I? But people can and do move between them without realising, although some do, and think they misremember something and forget it. Yesterday, you brought Sören from one reality, where Justin would have killed him, to one where there is no Justin.'

She stared at him, slammed her fan down on the marble, mouth tight. ‘I did not, then! You said to make him as welcome as if he were family, to not discuss him with other guests, and I did so, but I never saw him before tonight.’

‘A woman who looked and spoke like Hëlóise Gauthier went to London and brought Sören here,’ he said softly. ‘She conducted him to his suite to change from the ball and,’ he snapped his fingers. ‘Vanished.’

‘Who was she then,’ she demanded indignantly. ‘This *imposter*?’

‘She was born my twin sister, Vanya,’ he said gently. ‘She has become much more and she can easily move between worlds as she exists on all of them. One might call her the Divine Feminine perhaps.’

‘Hmm,’ she mused. ‘Oh very well, being impersonated by a goddess is not so bad.’

‘She very much enjoyed being you.’

‘Yes?’ But she sounded mollified. ‘Well. Go on. So if *I* (she) arrived with Sören this afternoon...ah!’

‘Yes, we went for a late lunch. And I gave Camino and his wife — all the staff in fact — the day off until six o clock this evening, as they will be working late, so there was no-one to answer the door. Caterers were coming and going, there was a lot of activity in the kitchens, but the rest of the villa was quiet. No-one saw them arrive and if they had, would not have thought much of it. There were guests expected. My only concern was that you might not be friendly enough with Sören when you saw him, or he would ask you something about the journey here.’ He smiled at her huff. She said, ‘I am no such fool.’

‘You are the great *intrigante*, my dear.’ He bowed.

‘*Merci*.’ She swept an ironic curtesy. ‘Well, go on.’

‘He will try to return the mirror to you. He must keep it.’

‘If course. Although why you wanted me to pretend it was mine, I do not know.’

‘He would not accept it from me. He does not know me. Whereas Hëlóise Gauthier, who rescued him from London, who listened and looked after him — he has more reason to trust.’

‘He will keep it,’ she nodded. ‘I will see to that. So?’

‘So: Vanya brought Sören from that reality into this,’ Vanimóre said. ‘A reality where Justin Roberts does not exist. In *that* world, a body was found floating in the Thames with the look of Sören. It was identified as he. Everyone in that timeline believes Sören dead. The body was not his, though. Some poor homeless derelict who died in their sleep. I altered them to ‘be’ Sören for that time. Justin would have killed him, Tonight in fact, around the same time as this ball began.’

‘*Salaude!*’

‘Yes, quite.’

Hëlóise was silent for a moment. ‘Very well, but why not just prevent Justin from killing Sören? Why bring him here?’

This time it was Vanimöré who was silent. He thought: *Because so much happened when I sat at the Monument, and when I bestirred myself to look, events had played out. And...*

'I had never tried moving someone from their reality into another,' he said truthfully. 'I wanted to see if I could do it.' (Of course I can, I can do anything, but *should* I? In this case, yes) Although it had not been he but Vanya tasked with bringing Sören across the divide. Such things were nothing to her. She wove through the weave of worlds easily.

'And there are certain people that have not been reborn into that world, people Sören would like to know.'

'Hmm,' she mused. 'And is there no Sören *here*?'

'No,' he said.

'So what of this Justin Roberts?'

'There *was* a Justin Roberts. He died as a child. Cot Death.'

'And the one who still lives,' she waved a gloved hand.

'Did live,' Vanimöré corrected. He reached into the pocket of his breeches, drew out a golden ring and turned it. *Yes, I feel thee, father. Nevertheless, Justin Robert's was easy as an orc to corrupt.*

'*Formidable*,' she exclaimed. 'How? Do tell.'

He laughed. 'You are a terrible woman, you know that?' He slipped the ring back into his pocket. 'Justin drives a car, a very expensive one, bought with Sören's money. There was a downpour when he was driving. He was furious to be cheated of Sören and lost control of it, it went into a river. He could not loosen his seatbelt, or close the window he had opened, to create an air bubble. And so, he drowned.' Vanimöré had ensured that he could not free himself, and that the window was jammed. And he had watched while Justin thrashed and screamed as the water trickled in, rising higher and higher, while he strained to keep his head above it, eyes bulging in horror until he could not hold his breath a moment longer.

And he had died seeing Vanimöré and knowing that, despite his beliefs, something far more powerful than his petty imagination could conceive had come for him. Standing unconcerned in the flood of the river, Vanimöré had said through the glass: 'This is for Sören.'

Hélóise shivered. '*Mon Dieu*.' Then, the ultimate pragmatist, shrugged her shoulders. 'Well and so. But why? Sören seems a lovely boy, but there are tens of thousands the same, and so why *him*?'

'There are not tens of thousands of him, I assure you.' There was only one Flame Imperishable, doomed by the Valar and the gods or other universes, born and reborn as Mortal to punish him for his rebellion, his brilliance, his unbending defiance. His sons doomed, his bloodline, and yet the fire, though it guttered low at times, would not be quenched.

'Ah well.' Hélóise patted his arm. 'But what will he do when he realises there is no Justin and has never been one, or not since his death as a child?'

Vanimöré looked out at the moonlit lake. 'Yes,' he said dryly. 'That *is* going to represent a challenge, but trust me: his mind will be able to handle the truth. And he will have others to support him.'

'Those seven? Why them? Professor Dooku I know of and Mark Lowry who has carried so many names. My father knew him in the Resistance!' She laughed. 'But the others...?'

‘Oh, they are all special in different ways, my dear Hëlóise.’ Born, some of them, into Mortality by the curse of gods, but with their Elven-blood in their eyes like the stars the Unbegotten had seen when they woke in Cuiviénen. He would see them return to their glory, he vowed. And let the gods tremble when they did. And Claire...last of the *Khadakhir*, and with *Ithiledhil* blood; she too was threaded into this across so many worlds...

‘So — he has made friends, here, tonight,’ Hëlóise said.

‘One could say that, yes.’ He had to smile.

‘And will he stay for the week, do you think?’

‘I believe he will...now.’

‘And meet the mysterious Mr. Steele?’

‘I did meet him. I danced with him,’ Vanimórë said. And had delivered his grilled cheese and Appelsín.

‘In the hall,’ she sparkled. ‘I could not help but note that you kept out of Mark’s way.’

He laughed softly. ‘I look too much like someone he would remember, even without the mask.’

‘Yourself, you mean?’

‘Why spoil his night? He does not know Lucien Steele, after all.’

Hëlóise opened and shut her fan. ‘So you did not bring them here for...?’ She put up her brows.

‘No. They owe me nothing. I must make amends for my...inattentiveness. I simply wanted to open a different door for him.’ He gazed across the moon-haunted lake. ‘For them. I *will* have to speak to him, explain things.’ And not not to Sören, but others too. *I am trying to redress the balance, to hurl the gauntlet of intent at these old, corrupt gods who damned them.*

‘But let him — all of them — simply enjoy this week with one another. A time out of time. They all bear wounds.’ And some of them from other worlds, and a time long lost.

He turned back to Hëlóise. ‘I have something to attend to.’ He felt the hard loop of the ring in his pocket. Compared to the One Ring, it was nothing, its power little more than a sliding glance. But still it was dangerous. ‘Perhaps you will act as their host this week?’

‘*Naturellement*,’ she replied. ‘Although they will be disappointed not to meet you.’

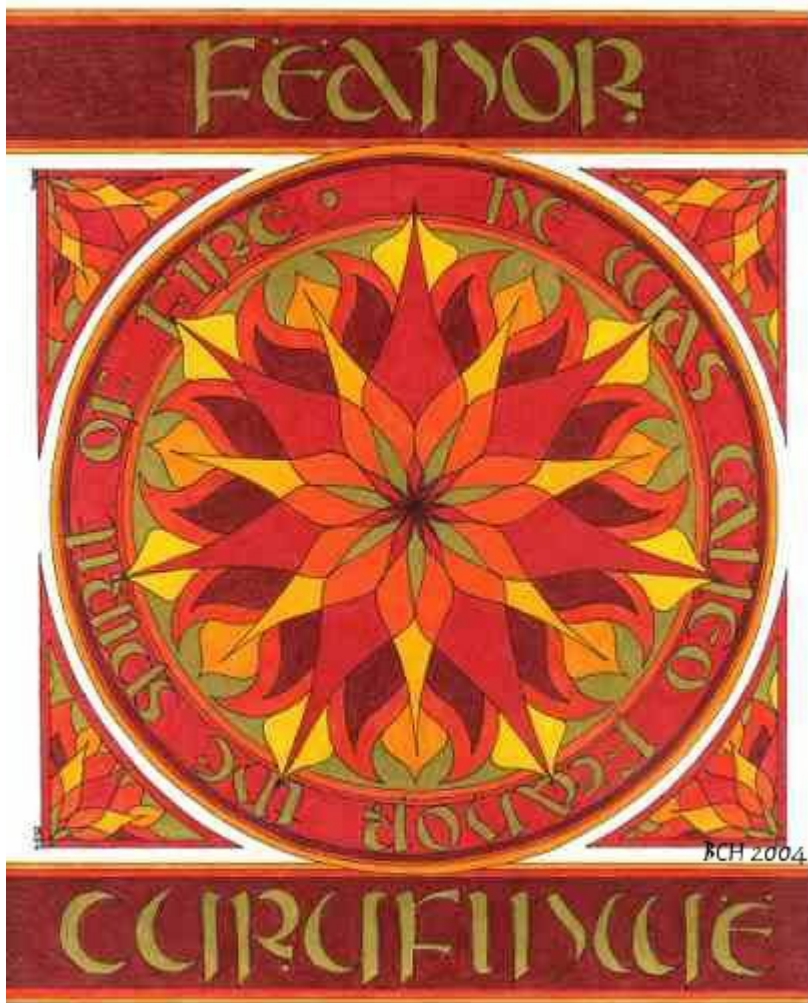
‘Hardly, and there will be other times.’

‘I see. Well, you are, as ever, inscrutable, my dear Lucien.’ She arched her brows. ‘It is a full moon tonight and it is May Day for the pagans in three days time. One could read relevance into that.’

Vanimóré placed her hand on his arm, and they turned from the balcony. ‘One could indeed,’ he said.

Note: There are quite a few Elven insignia's around, but my favourites are by Elegaeer on DA. And the murals Sören sees of Fëanor and Fingolfin would look very like these.





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