Rating:	Explicit
Archive Warning:	Choose Not To Use Archive Warnings
Category:	M/M, F/M
Fandom:	The Silmarillion, Flameborn (Multiverse)
Relationship:	Maglor | Makalaurë/Sören Sigurðsson (OMC)/Nicolae Dooku (OMC)
Character:	Maglor, Sören Sigurðsson (OMC), Nicolae Dooku (OMC), Alinta Jonsson (OFC), Kenny Kim (OMC), Loki - Character, Anthony Hewlett-Johnson (OMC), Frankie O'Riordan (OFC)
Additional Tags:	Alternate Universe - The Force Works, Post-Canon, Maglor (Tolkien) Through History, Reincarnation, Past Lives, Past Life Incest, Polyamory, Threesome - M/M/M, and a couple het scenes, Prophetic Dreams, Iceland, Long Lost/Secret Relatives, Dagor Dagorath, Silmarils, References To Norse Mythology
Series:	Part 3 of Northern Lights
Stats:	Published: 2019-07-12 Chapters: 30/30 Words: 154350

Like Flames

by DumpsterPhoenix (verhalen)

Summary

Sören, Maglor and Dooku are living as a triad in Iceland and all is well. But they're about to get an even bigger shakeup than they did a year ago when the Dagor Dagorath goes off in another universe and its effects are felt across the multiverse, with consequences that end up sending them all the way to Canada, then Australia.

Notes

Due to the extremely fraught history surrounding the Northern Lights universe - with regards to the communication breakdown with two collaborators, the way the works have been misrepresented, and subsequent targeted harassment that has been going on since 2020 - all but one of the works in this universe are archive-locked on both Ao3 and Squidgeworld. I worked hard enough on this universe [with the sequels to this fic it comes to over 900,000 words] that I don't feel right about deleting it, and I do not orphan works involving my OCs so there are no contested claims of ownership, but I also dislike being reminded that this series exists.

I also wrote this work at a very different time in my life [2019-2020, with revisions in late 2020], and my writing style and preferred themes have evolved since then as well. This work should not be taken as typical of my works from 2022 onward.

Now this is not the end. It is not even the beginning of the end. But it is, perhaps, the end of the beginning.
-Winston Churchill

Chapter 1

Adelaide, Australia
December 2020

Megadeth and Metallica Kim-Jonsson were having their thrice-weekly piano lessons. Alinta Jonsson smiled as she watched from the doorway to the rec room, once again glad that she'd found a cool teacher who not only didn't bat an eyelash at the fraternal twins being mixed-race, but was teaching them to play pop and rock as well as classical pieces. Her son and daughter were only six but gifted.

Very gifted.

"Thanks for coming, Jer," Ali said as Jeremy Hogan was packing up.

"Ah, you're welcome. Your kids are always a delight." The deeply tanned aging hippie grinned, and affectionately tousled the kids' mullets as they hugged his waist.

Ali tousled Jer's long grey hair then and slapped him on the shoulder. She gave him his usual fee for the session and then an extra few bucks as a tip.

"Oh no, you don't need to -"

"No, I insist." Ali looked through the sliding glass doors out at the patio, where her boyfriend Kenny Kim was setting up the grill. "Actually, you want to stay for dinner, and drinks?"

That was what he did. Ali was a moderate drinker - painfully aware of what alcohol had done to much of the Aboriginal side of her family - but one mojito was nice on a warm summer day like this. The kids played on the floor as the three grownups watched telly, and then Megadeth and Metallica wanted to go outside and kick a ball around so Ali stepped out with them, leaving Kenny and Jer to their mojitos.

Then Kenny slid open the door and leaned, folding his arms. "Hey, Ali... there's some Icelandic dude on the news. You might wanna come see this."

Ali raised an eyebrow. First, at Kenny's use of "dude" - the Korean-American had lived in Australia for twelve years now and still hadn't completely adopted Australian vocabulary, though he sounded more Aussie than California these days. Second, that some random Icelandic person would be of interest, even though it was her father's home country and it was a small enough place to assume that everyone sort of knew everyone. Ali had never been to her father's homeland, though it was on her bucket list.

Ali came in anyway, as Metallica and Megadeth continued to kick the ball around.

"The scientific community remains in shock following the mysterious disappearance of the thirty-six-year-old astrophysicist Dagnýr Sigurðsson, his husband, and their two daughters..."

There was a photo of Dagnýr, boy-next-door look, short dark hair, grey eyes like hers, dimples when he smiled. His husband, who the text strip with the newscast identified as Matt, was unfortunate-looking - big ears, messy dyed platinum blonde hair, thick glasses, kind of a funny face - but they were cute together in their happiness, and cuter in the

picture of them holding their babies.

One of the babies had dark hair, one had red hair.

"Canadian authorities are still investigating all possible leads..."

Ali's heart started hammering. She remembered her haul for Borovkov Enterprises days ago, picking up "three cunts" at Alice Springs, not told that they would also have two babies who, as it turned out, had dark hair and red hair like in the photo. Baby girls, and it was girls who'd gone missing. It had been Protocol Delta - top-secret, not to be discussed with anyone outside her boss, no names given for her passengers, no interaction allowed beyond basic instructions to the passengers on a needed basis only such as giving travel itinerary, and they were dropped off at a warehouse at the end of the trip; Ali had somewhat broken protocol to help comfort the girls when they were crying, and one of the three men had an unusual accent, though he didn't look like the man in the picture apart from also having dark hair, but his was shoulder-length and curly.

Even with the limited information Ali had about them and their situation, she had figured out they were on the run from *something*, though she'd assumed refugees, maybe, and now...

A flash of memory. Her father, Böðvar Jónsson, showing a much smaller, precocious version of her a picture of his eldest sister Brynhildur, at her marriage to a man named Sigurð. The very briefest mention, once upon a time, *"you've got cousins back in Iceland but their guardians -"* apparently Brynhildur and Sigurð were both dead - *"won't let me talk to them 'cos I married a black lady."*

That had to be a coincidence, right? That there was some bloke with the patronymic of Sigurðsson, who had two babies who bore a resemblance to the two babies that were in her truck just days earlier?

Ali's twenty-seven years of life had taught her there were very few actual coincidences.

There was another picture of Dagnýr on the screen now, from when he was a student at Oxford, maybe 19-20 years old, hair to his shoulders, *curly*. Like the hair of the man with the weird Scandi-sounding accent in the truck.

"You all right, babe?" Kenny noticed.

"Yeh, ta." Ali got up. "Would you excuse me for just a few minutes?"

She went to their bedroom, where her cell phone was on its charger. She waved her hand and the phone flew off its charger into her hand. She pulled up her contacts and her father's number. Calling her father would be a crapshoot, since he lived on a sheep farm in the middle of nowhere in South Australia and eschewed a lot of modern technology, only having a cell because his kids made him - he didn't even have Internet, his knowledge of anything online came from what his kids told him - and he didn't always have his phone on, or charged, but she had to try.

One ring. Two. She pushed hard into her father's mind, even though she knew it would give her a headache later. *Pick up the sodding phone, Da.*

Three. Four. Five. *Pick up. Pick up...* Ali rubbed her dreadlocks, feeling ready to explode.

"Possum?"

"Da."

"Possum! Hey!" A soft chuckle. Then, "Are you all right? 'Cos you don't normally scream into my head..."

"Yeh. Uh. Da. Ha ha..." She ran a nervous hand through her locks again and sat at the edge of the bed. "This is gonna be a really strange and random question, but just. Like. Answer it, if you don't mind."

"42."

"*Da, I swear to fucking god.*"

"I'm sorry."

"No, you're not sorry, and don't do this shit to me on a Thursday." A pause. "I could never get the hang of Thursdays."

They had a little laugh over that, and then Böðvar said, "What is it, possum."

"You said, once upon a time... god, how old was I then, five or six? That I had cousins in Iceland."

A long pause. "Jæja, you do. Why, one of them try to look you up on the Headbook or something...?"

"It's Facebook, and no, 'cos you said that you weren't allowed to talk to them, 'cos of Mum, you know, being black."

A sigh. "Já."

"Yeh. I don't think they even know I exist...?"

"Shit, probably not."

"Well... we're adults now, they don't have their guardians in the way, so... what are their names? Do you remember?"

"I don't, but I have a picture of them when they were wee, it's got their names on it, if you hold on for just a sec..."

"A sec" turned out to be five minutes, and Ali snickered as she heard Böðvar yelling at their sheepdog in the background. "AULI, YOU CUTE LITTLE ARSEHOLE, WHERE DID YOU HIDE MY SLIPPERS THIS TIME?"

And then at last Böðvar was back on the phone. "OK possum. They're Magnús, Sören, and Dagnýr."

Shit. "...Dagnýr."

"Já, Dagnýr."

"Dagnýr Sigurðsson?"

"Jæja."

"About mid thirties or so?"

"It's got their birthdates on the photo aaaand he and Sören were born in '84. They're twins. Fraternal."

"Kayyyyyyyyyyy." *Fuck. Fuck. FUCK.* "Ta, Da. I'll... talk to you again soon, OK?"

"OK. Hope finding your cousins goes well, possum."

Of course he wouldn't know, since he rarely watched telly - Böðvar read a lot of books, constantly, something he'd instilled in his children. She wondered if her mum would tell him, since Medika *did* watch telly, though typically avoided the news because "it's always sad things". Both her parents were *gifted*, which was a big reason why they fell in love when they met three decades ago; they were both powerful empaths, and the news tended to make her mum cry.

Ali hit "End" and let out a deep sigh. "Fuck. Fucking *fuck*, bloody fucking *hell*..."

She let the phone float back to where it had been sitting on the dresser, and then she waved her hand and the dresser drawer underneath it opened. She closed her eyes and opened them as the sketchpad that the one with the heavy accent had accidentally left in her truck. It had really been bothering her that she hadn't been able to return this, as Protocol Delta had given no names, no contact info. She'd brought them from Alice Springs to Sydney, which was one hell of a drive, and she *assumed* they were somewhere there, *maybe*.

I need to find them. I need to find him.

A pillow hit her in the bum. She whirled around and watched as the pillow floated into Kenny's waiting hands.

"Ali, what's going on?" Kenny put a hand on his hips. "And don't tell me nothing, Alinta." *Because we both know it's not nothing.*

"That missing scientist we saw on telly is my cousin."

"*What?*" Kenny's eyebrows shot up. "What the -"

"OK, listen, Kenny? Don't say *shit*. To anyone. I think I know *something* but I'm not sure what I know, I only know that the little bit of it is bad -"

"OK, so maybe you should call a hotline -"

"*I fucking can't.*" Ali vehemently shook her head. "This is..." She took a deep breath. "Something's going on, I don't know what, and I can't tell you the little bit of what I do know about it, *I'm sorry*, but calling a hotline, telling the government, it just." She took a deep breath. "Might make things worse. It's a gut feeling, but my gut is rarely ever wrong."

"Yeah." Kenny nodded. "I know." He frowned. "What are you going to do?"

"I don't know. I don't *fucking* know."

He gestured with his head at the sketch pad. "What you got there?" He held out his hand

and the pad sailed across the room over to him. He started flipping through it. "Oh holy fucking *shit*, Ali, there's even a fucking sketch of him."

"*What?*" Ali hadn't looked beyond the first few pages, feeling like she was intruding on something deeply personal.

There it was. A colored pencil sketch of Dagnýr Sigurðsson, who she'd seen for all of two minutes on telly but his face was stuck in her head now. He was dressed like a wizard, summoning a giant serpent. A serpent that looked like it was made of space, its scales all rainbow galaxies and nebulas, with starry voids in between. Eyes of fire. The date "2008" was scrawled in the corner, with a strange runic-looking symbol that she guessed was a signature.

That was one of my cousins in the truck, and he has his brother's kids. She closed her eyes and she could *almost* see it. Some geezer bloke, like Jer but with longer hair and a longer beard and taller, handing the babies over. *"Keep them safe. Keep* yourselves *safe. Good luck."*

Then the feeling like she was being SHOVED, enough that she had to lean against the bed to hold herself steady. The mental image of a door slamming and the same accented voice from the truck: *Don't you EVER fucking do that again.*

Ali could smell fire, but nothing was on fire. Then the smell was gone.

That did nothing to deter her resolve to find him. If anything, it made it stronger. *He's like me.* Her heart was racing again. *He's like me...*

"We've probably got elf blood, you know. It's magic." A memory of Böðvar after a few beers, watching the sunset. *"Yer mum, she said she saw it when we met."*

Ali had always thought he was joshing, the same way he liked to joke about wrestling polar bears back in Iceland and - on his rare trips out into civilization - enjoyed taking the piss out of American tourists by pretending he was Steve Irwin, but the memory gave her a chill now, remembering again the bloke in the truck with the long, long black hair and silver eyes, the beautiful voice, where Ali's first impression was *He's not human. He was alive during the Dreamtime*, followed by *I know him, somehow. Some*when.

And of course, she'd dismissed it as *crazy fucking shit*, even though she'd learned over the years that her impressions were rarely wrong.

Ali pinched the bridge of her nose. *I have no idea how to even start.* She had a feeling that if the one with the weird accent was her cousin ("*IF*", she thought to herself, seeing quotation marks), and he was on the run for something connected to his brother's disappearance, he would be using an assumed identity.

It occurred to her then there was probably someone in Borovkov Enterprises who *did* know, and she would be risking her job if she went digging, because that in and of itself was a violation of Protocol Delta, never mind the ways she'd already violated the protocol just by interacting with the people she was transporting. She was the breadwinner, Kenny was mostly a stay-at-home dad with the occasional photography job that didn't pay much, and if she got fired from her job times would be rough for awhile.

Not to mention that whatever was happening was probably dangerous. If her cousin Dagnýr was taken by god-knows-who and one of her other cousins had to go on the run and take the kids, well... that was some pretty heavy shit. They had run afoul of some bad

people, clearly, and she would potentially be putting herself and her boyfriend and kids in danger for family she didn't even know.

And yet, she remembered the haunted look in those brown eyes, the thousand-yard stare, the feeling of utter defeat and *hopelessness* rolling off him and his companions (lovers?). She had family in trouble, who felt lost and alone in the world.

Family that had been stolen from her.

*Let me see what I can dig up without getting sacked.*But that could wait, as Kenny was dragging her out of the bedroom now, to where Metallica and Megadeth were waiting to be read their nightly bedtime story.

Chapter 2

Akureyri, Iceland
September 2020

It was Tuesday the twenty-second, but not any typical Tuesday. Sören and Maglor had their usual classes at Logifugl Listaskóli, the studio Sören owned - Sören taught art classes and Maglor taught music - but today was Sören's two-year wedding anniversary with Dooku.

Today, as Sören and Maglor were pulling in front of their three-bedroom house, they saw a package waiting on their doorstep. Then Sören's phone went off. It was the number of his aunt Gitta, who lived in Scotland.

"Sören!" It was Gitta's voice. "Happy anniversary!"

"Awwwww, you remembered!"

“Did you get my present?"

"Oh... that's..." Sören looked at the package on the doorstep. "That's what just arrived? We haven't opened it yet, we just got in..."

"Oh that's OK, I can't talk too long, we're about to go on our after-dinner walk on the beach."

“OK! Well, thank you for checking in and making sure it arrived. Have fun with the walk on the beach, that sounds lovely.”

“You should visit Scotland sometime.”

*Well, we may end up doing more than visit, you know, later.*Sören still didn't like to think about that, even though he knew it was inevitable, since Maglor was an Elf and Sören and Dooku had been given the gift of immortality last year, not aging anymore, and they could only stay so long in one place without arousing suspicion. But Iceland would always be home. *We'll see where we end up.* They still hadn't decided on where they'd move to next, since that was a ways off yet as far as they were concerned, and a sore spot. Sören tried to keep the cheer in his voice as he replied. “We probably will, sometime. And, ah, *takk*, so much, for the anniversary gift. That was very thoughtful of you, whatever it was."

"You're welcome. Give your husbands my love. And love from Jane too."

"I will." When the phone call ended, Sören told Maglor, "That was Gitta -"

"I know." Maglor nodded. "Shall we open this?"

"Let's wait for Nico to get back."

Ion Nicolae Dooku was at the grocery store, and once he got inside he used the Force to move the bags into the kitchen, even though he was capable of carrying them himself, because he wanted to embrace both his husbands. And of course, their dog Huan and cat Snúður - immortal like they were - came up then, not wanting to be left out of the pettings.

"We've got a package from Gitta and Jane," Sören said, feeling as excited as Huan

looked. "Do we open it now or after dinner?"

"How about while dinner is cooking?" Dooku asked, and then he looked at Maglor. "Your assistance is required in the kitchen, Macalaurë."

Maglor raised an eyebrow, but grinned and followed Dooku into the kitchen. While they worked in the kitchen, Sören sat and sketched for awhile, with the cat and dog on either side of him on the couch.

When they'd gotten dinner started, Maglor and Dooku came back into the living room and Dooku carefully, neatly unwrapped the package.

"You're not just gonna rip it open?" Sören asked.

Dooku gave him a look. "I'm not a barbarian like you."

Maglor hissed, "*Hells*," under his breath just as Sören replied with, "Hi Not A Barbarian Like You -"

Dooku used the Force to crumple the gift wrap he'd gone to such trouble to neatly pull off the box, and throw it at Sören.

"You walked into it," Maglor said.

"SILENCE."

Sören snorted.

Dooku cut open the box. There was a beautiful wreath inside, resting on top of a crocheted blanket, with a note saying that Jane had made the wreath and Gitta had made the blanket.

The blanket went over the back of the couch, adding a nice homey touch to the living room, and went well with the sea colors of their decor. The wreath had seashells, driftwood, sea glass, and various dried flowers.

Sören felt bittersweet. After his parents died, he'd been raised by his father's sister Katrín and her husband Einar, and from what he'd been told years later Katrín and Einar had prohibited Gitta and Jane from being in contact with the children because they were lesbians. Their attempt at ensuring heteronormativity had backfired in the most spectacular way possible, but it had robbed Sören, his twin brother Dagnýr, and their transgender sister Margrét of the support they'd needed growing up, grieving the loss of their parents. Sören vaguely remembered hearing about an uncle, his mother's youngest sibling, and wondered now what became of him. He'd assumed growing up that Gitta had not been in touch due to disinterest, and he'd learned that assumption was painfully wrong; they'd reunited at his sister's wedding in August 2019, albeit too briefly, and had kept in regular touch since then. But he couldn't be sure with his uncle, if he was even still alive. As many years as Einar had been dead, and Katrín had joined him in death in 2017, they still owned space in his head. *You're worthless, a waste of space, nobody wants you.* Gitta and Jane had wished they could have raised them - Sören often wondered how things would have been different if they did - but he couldn't guarantee the same warmth from his uncle.

At least he had Gitta and Jane. And though it wouldn't be forever, he cherished what he had now. *My moms.*

In the meantime he had the closest thing he'd ever had to father figures, in his husbands. They sensed his ache and pulled him close between them and Sören reached out to touch both of them, admiring the two most beautiful men he'd ever laid eyes on. Dooku, a retired barrister of seventy-one, though he looked closer to late fifties or early sixties, sporting short silver hair and neatly trimmed silver beard, dark eyes, olive-skinned, six-five barefoot, a lean, muscular build that he kept trim through regular physical activity, a deep-voiced, elegant Englishman born to exiled Romanian nobility. Maglor... an Elf, though he had not known that at first. Closer to seven feet tall, dark hair to the middle of his back when glamoured, to his thighs when not, pale with the build of a soldier, pointy ears usually hidden by his hair, and the voice of an angel.

Sören had met Dooku while he lived in London, at an exhibit of his art, and the two had instantly formed a connection, even though they were very opposite in personality. Dooku was the second love of Sören's life, the first being "Alejandro" who had left claiming he was in an arranged marriage, then had crashed back into Sören's life after he and Dooku were married to explain the truth. And they had become a triad.

But the truth was more complicated than even Maglor had been aware of. Sören himself had been an Elf in a past life, along with Dooku - the legendary Fëanor and Fingolfin, in an incestuous relationship with their brother Finarfin as well as with Maglor, all consenting adults, in the First Age, which had ended in tragedy. After reincarnating as mortal, Sören and Dooku had both experienced abuse in their families, and bullying, and years of loneliness and depression... a continuation of the Doom. And Maglor had not known who they were, initially, but the pieces all began to come together over the summer of 2019, the final pieces set in place with the help of Gandalf, disguised as a human named Edmund Billingsley, one of Dagnýr's colleagues at the University of Toronto. Sören also learned that his mother and father had been a Valkyrie and a warrior of Valhalla, respectively, and had been punished for defying Odin, and after they had been cast out of Valhalla, Odin had killed his parents before he was six.

The Doom had not been able to keep the three of them from re-aligning. And they had two powerful allies in their corner. The first was Ingwion, who was the cousin of Fingolfin and Finarfin, the nephew of Fëanor's stepmother Indis, had ascended to godhood, known to the Norse as Freyr, and was now living among humans disguised as a mortal named Ingmar Borovkov. His blood had made Sören and Dooku immortal, both so they could stay with Maglor and because it was their best chance at being able to withstand a battle with Odin, and eventually the Valar. The other god favoring them was Loki – living in Iceland as a man named Flóki, in a triad with Sören's sister Margrét and his best friend Frankie; the prophesy of the Fenrir-wolf come to destroy Odin was actually Fëanor, and Flóki had offered to claim Sören and Sören's siblings as his, since Odin had taken their parents away. Flóki was down in Reykjavik and Sören saw him from time to time, but he had not seen Ingwion since Ingwion had left in August 2019. It had been over a year now, and Sören still missed Ingwion, terribly. He couldn't think about the subject of immortality without thinking of the one who had given him immortality.

"Dinner's almost ready." Dooku planted a kiss on Sören's brow.

"Do you need my help...?" Maglor glanced at Dooku as he got up.

"Why don't you set things up like how I discussed with you in the kitchen?" Dooku was poker-faced, but Sören saw the glint of mischief in those dark eyes, and Dooku gave Sören a little smile before he ducked out.

"Hey Sören, go in the studio for a minute," Maglor said.

"Why? Whatcha doing?" Sören asked.

"Just... do it."

Sören blew a raspberry at him, but did as he was told, with Huan and Snúður following behind him. Sören flomped onto the nest in the corner of the combination art and music room and the Icelandic sheepdog/Corgi mix climbed on top of him, lapping his face, and that was how Maglor found them a few moments later, smiling fondly.

Sören came out. They usually ate in the kitchen-dining area but the living room was set up with blankets and pillows spread in front of the fireplace, a fire going. It was a cool night and just starting to rain, so the fire was cozy. Candles were lit in frosted glass tealight holders on the fireplace mantle.

Dooku brought out a tray. Sören clapped his hands excitedly like a big kid at the pot of fondue, and the things to dip in the fondue - pieces of French bread, bacon, grilled mushrooms, fingerling potatoes, roasted cauliflower and zucchini. There was wine to go with the fondue. As he set it down before the fire, Maglor started the stereo system, and Sören smiled as Anita Baker came on.

It was an entire playlist of sensual, romantic music - Marvin Gaye, Sade, Maxwell, Usher, D'Angelo, Toni Braxton, Jill Scott, The Weeknd.

They fed each other like newlywed lovers, dipping the bread and bacon and vegetables into the melted cheese and putting it in each other's mouths, licking and sucking cheese from each other's fingers, stealing kisses between rounds at the fondue pot.

But there were also moments of comedy, with Huan and Snúður coming over to beg. Huan eventually stole a piece of bacon, running off with it. Exasperated, Dooku threw a piece of bacon across the living room for Snúður to catch, and Snúður dragged his "prey" off and left them alone.

When the fondue and its accompaniments were polished off, they cuddled up together with wine, watching the fire. Sören was already horny, and feeling warm.

Warm and horny enough that when Dooku and Maglor went into the kitchen to take care of dishes and bring out dessert, Sören stripped, and they came back to find him looking like dessert, naked and fully erect, propped up on one elbow.

Dessert was chocolate fondue with fresh fruit to dip in the chocolate, and Dooku and Maglor decided to follow Sören's lead and also get naked. Sören "accidentally" spilled chocolate on himself and Maglor cleaned it with his tongue, and soon Maglor and Dooku were eating chocolate and fruit off Sören's naked body, then Sören and Dooku eating off Maglor, and Maglor and Sören eating off Dooku, and then just grooming his silver pelt of chest hair with their tongues, nuzzling it, rubbing it. The fruit was gone before the chocolate fondue, and they poured the rest of the pot over themselves, taking turns licking each other clean. All three were erect now, and when the chocolate was gone they licked spilled wine from each other's bodies, at last taking turns kissing as they got in a position to rub their three cocks together, stroke them together.

Licking each other all over had set the mood for a similar yet different kind of fun. After kissing and teasing each other's cocks for awhile, they assembled - Sören sucked Maglor's cock, Maglor sucked Dooku, and Dooku sucked Sören. Every now and again Sören would let Maglor's cock slip from his mouth and thrust his tongue into Maglor's

opening, feasting on him there, licking slowly then fast. Maglor and Dooku followed suit, until all three were trembling, moaning loudly into each other, desperate for release.

Dooku lay on his back and Sören poured lube over his cock, teasing them both again by rubbing his cock against Dooku's, but finally Sören turned around and impaled himself before laying with his back to Dooku's chest, Dooku's arms around him, holding him as he took his first few thrusts. Maglor pushed into him then, his cock rubbing against Dooku's inside Sören, kissing Sören again and again as Dooku kissed Sören's neck, kissing Dooku over Sören's shoulder, before Dooku tilted Sören's face so they could kiss, and Maglor licked and suckled Sören's nipples, playing with the rings in them.

They fucked slowly, savoring, lost in a dreamy haze of sensual pleasure and loving connection. Sex with either of his husbands on their own was good, and Maglor and Dooku enjoyed their own private time as well, but there was something about the three of them together that was magnificent, something Sören compared to a work of art. Sören loved being between them, feeling them both inside him, holding them as they held him, the wild sweetness of passion. They let the edge build, keeping the pace slow, letting the tension wind and wind until they finally gave in to moments of pure, raw hunger, fucking hard, savage, making loud cries and howls and screams and shouts. Sören's legs were on Maglor's shoulders, and he went from losing his ability to speak English to losing his ability to make words altogether, not even able to scream as his orgasm took his breath away, coming in shuddery gasps.

The feeling of both of them coming inside him - cock coming on cock - was one of Sören's favorite things. He made a little purring noise and drifted off on a cloud of bliss, coming back to Maglor petting him, Dooku trailing little kisses over his beard. Maglor skritched Sören's beard like a cat and Sören meowed, which made them laugh before Maglor kissed the tip of Sören's nose.

They took turns kissing some more, sweetly and tenderly at first, then the kisses heated until they were roused to hardness again. Maglor ate his and Dooku's cum out of Sören as Sören and Dooku necked and petted, finally rubbing their cocks together, and Maglor took them both in his mouth, Sören and Dooku kissing even more hungrily, caressing each other, gently fucking Maglor's mouth. When they came together, the way Maglor shuddered and moaned as he swallowed them down let them know he came too - Sören could feel it across their bond, as well - and then Maglor came up to kiss them, letting them taste themselves on him, the taste of them combined delicious, salty-sweet.

Dooku pushed Maglor onto his back and kissed him again and again, fingers playing over Maglor's body, as Sören licked Maglor's cock, just licking it, teasing him. At last Dooku grabbed Sören's curls and pulled him up to kiss him, tasting Maglor's precum on his tongue. Sören poured lube over Maglor's cock and Dooku poured it into Maglor's opening. Sören straddled Maglor's hips and sank down, and then Dooku got behind him and pushed into Maglor, his arms around Sören again, kissing his neck, tilting his face so he and Sören could kiss as Sören rode Maglor's cock and Dooku took Maglor, slowly.

It was another haze of desire, the three losing themselves in sensation, in each other, that heady mix of vulnerability, surrender, and possession. Dooku reached around to play with Sören's cock as Sören's hands roamed over Maglor's body and Maglor's hands were on Sören, every now and again on what he could touch of Dooku, as well.

Coming together, their orgasm was even more shattering than the ones before. Sören collapsed in Maglor's arms, and made a noise of deep contentment as he felt Dooku resting against him, nuzzling his curls. Being petted and held in the warm glow of the fire, the warm glow of orgasmic bliss, Sören slid into a nap.

This time he was out for longer, and he woke in Maglor's arms, still snuggled into Maglor's chest, but Dooku was up, and Sören wondered where he was. Then he heard movement in the hall. He got up and walked over, naked, moving a bit gingerly after the use of his body.

Dooku, completely naked, had chosen right then to do a home improvement project. Dooku had been an active senior before immortality, but since he'd taken Ingwion's blood Dooku had reported feeling downright *young* again, doing things he hadn't done in years like running, and now it seemed he had a surge of energy after sex, when usually he'd be asleep. "This has been bothering me since we moved in," Dooku said, gesturing to the hall closet, which was now empty, with everything in it in the hallway. The clothes rack was slanted, and there was a small hole in the closet wall. "I was thinking of where to hang the wreath Jane made, and the hall closet door seemed like the perfect place... and I decided then it was time to finally fix this."

"Buckass naked."

Dooku looked down, and blushed. "I... I suppose."

"Mkay." Sören grinned. He peered into the closet again. This house had been where he'd spent the first four years of his life - it had become his again rather by not-an-accident or not-a-coincidence in August 2019 - and Sören vaguely remembered those same cosmetic errors being there. Dooku handed him a flashlight so he could get a better look at the hole in the wall, and Sören stepped into the closet.

That was when he saw it. There was something*in* the hole in the wall. "What in the fuck..."

"What?"

Sören switched places with Dooku. Dooku glared at it. Then he turned to Sören. "Hand me a stick."

Sören put his cock in Dooku's hand.

"Goddammit, Sören, I mean an actual stick. Like the kind you play fetch with."

"You can play fetch with this stick."

"I'm being serious."

"Hi being serious -"

"SÖREN."

Huan had a stick near Snúður's cat toys at Snúður's cat tree, and it was just the right size to poke into the wall. Dooku pulled out a piece of paper that was wrapped up with an elastic band. He handed it to Sören.

"I don't know what that is," Dooku said.

"I don't either, but we'll find out, I guess."

Dooku put his hands on his hips. "It makes me wonder if we'll find anything else in here."

He started to take down the clothing rack, instead of just trying to lift the crooked side back to its proper height, and when he removed the rack, a panel fell out from the wall.

Dooku shone a flashlight into the open panel, made a noise of surprise, reached into the wall and pulled out a notebook.

Sören opened it. The writing was still legible, and the first page noted that it was the diary of Sigurð Tollasson, dated 1985. *Thirty-five years ago.*

"You look like you've seen a ghost," Dooku said.

Sören slammed the notebook shut. "My father's, to be precise."

Chapter 3

Sören would have appreciated sleeping in the next day, but it was Wednesday and he had classes at the studio. At the usual time, Maglor drove them out to Logifugl Listaskóli. Maglor taught guitar today; Sören had ceramics in the morning and sketching in the afternoon. The ceramics class was one of Sören's favorites, and usually put him in a good mood. And there was some of that, but not the full glow - there was a strange feeling of foreboding Sören couldn't quite put his finger on, like something was about to happen and he didn't know what.

Someone else might have dismissed this as paranoia, and particularly the kind of paranoia that people with PTSD lived with - indeed, for much of Sören's life, any periods of happiness were usually short-lived, pending a crash into disaster, and he had learned from repeat past experience to distrust it. He'd had calm and stability with Dooku for the better part of three years, and with Maglor along for the last year of it. Apart from the shakeup of Maglor coming back into his life a little over a year ago, which had resolved itself quickly enough, and the pain of missing Ingwion, things had been very, very good. Almost too good. While Sören didn't quite believe time healed all wounds, he was starting to slowly snap out of the mindset that all good things in his life would create a sort of karmic backlash and leave him worse off than before.

And yet, Sören also had a degree of precognition, telepathy and empathy, and telekinesis - Force sensitive, Dooku called it, abilities present in a tiny amount of the population - and he'd also learned from past experiences to trust his gut. He didn't always - which had caused him no small amount of trouble, most notably with his ex Justin Roberts - but he was trying to take Ingwion's admonishment to heart, that he needed to trust his instincts more. And he couldn't shake the feeling that something was up.

That feeling intensified when he and Maglor drove back from the studio and Maglor was more quiet than usual, his brow furrowed. Once back at their house in Akureyri. Dooku was writing on his laptop, and he got up to greet them at the door, hugging and kissing each of them. Dooku had tea ready, expecting them, and as they sat down to tea, with Huan and Snúður trotting out for pettings, Dooku asked, "How was your day?"

"All right, I guess," Sören said, and Maglor nodded. "You?"

Dooku took a deep breath. He put his tea down, and pinched the bridge of his nose. "I'm sensing a disturbance in the Force. I'm not quite sure what it is, but..."

"Same." Maglor nodded.

Sören nodded too, with a sharp exhale. "Shit."

"It's enough that I've been tempted to get out the *palantir* and scry to see what it is," Maglor said, "but on the other hand... I don't know if I want to."

"Yes, sometimes knowing what it is makes it worse," Dooku said. "I think the best course of action *for now* is to let it go unless the feeling gets stronger... or what it is reveals itself to us. Which it may."

"Yeah, things have a way of manifesting sooner or later." Maglor leaned back in his chair and sipped his tea. "In this case, my guess is sooner."

"All we can really do is make a note of it, continue to compare notes on the status of the feeling, and distract ourselves in the meantime. Which, on that subject, Macalaurë, Sören, do you care to accompany me to the store? Figure out what we're doing for dinner?"

Sören knew that his own best distraction was art, and he might as well paint with this nervous energy. "You guys can go. I'll stay here and try to paint or something."

"Oh, good," Maglor said, smiling, reaching out to squeeze Sören's hand. "If you get in the zone, you want me to play on the harp while you paint, later this evening?"

"That sounds great," Sören said. *Even better if we take a break to fuck like we normally do.* Creating together tended to make them both randy, and some of their most passionate encounters had been after a session of Maglor making music as Sören painted. Sören understood now that this was an act of power - the Flame and the Song working together, and the sex was more than just sex, it was magical. But even before he'd had that knowledge of what he was, and what Maglor was, they had a creative synergy that felt absolutely *right*, and it was that rightness he craved now, when it felt like something somewhere somehow was starting to go wrong.

Sören saw his husbands off with a hug and a kiss, and then he went to the one of the bedrooms that he and Maglor had turned into a studio, set up with musical equipment, art supplies, and a futon against a wall as a "nest" for breaks. Sören took out a blank canvas, put it on an easel, and got his oil paints, brushes, and cleaner ready. He sat in front of the canvas and meditated for a few moments, trying to get a mental image - what to paint. At first there was nothing. Then, even though it was the day after the fall equinox, he saw snow. Ice. He could *smell* it, clean and crisp and somewhat burnt.

Burnt?

A vision of the Helcaraxë. A vision of the ships burning... A warning going off in his head *you will always be an exile. Winter is coming, and your life will go up in flames.*

Sören didn't want to paint now.

When Maglor and Dooku got back, Sören was playing Stardew Valley. Maglor gave him a concerned look, but Sören said nothing about the vision as he looked up from his game. Instead he asked, “You need help putting groceries away?”

“No, dear, we've got it,” Dooku said. Sören laughed as he watched the bags float into the kitchen. Dooku gave him a comforting little pat on the shoulder and tousle of his curls as he followed the floating bags.

Huan and Snúður began to beg for food even though they still had food in their bowls. Sören glanced into the kitchen and watched Maglor pause the putting away of the groceries to get out the dog and cat treats, opening the cupboard with his hands instead of using telekinesis, since they still preferred to do many things by hand. Just as Maglor handed the bag of cat treats to Dooku, Sören heard Dooku's phone go off.

Dooku used the Force to slip the phone out of his pocket and float up into his free hand. He set the cat treat bag down on the counter to swipe the phone and check the number. His eyebrows shot up. “I have to take this.” Maglor nodded and Dooku marched off towards the bedroom.

Dooku rarely got calls, and Sören had a feeling it was important; he wondered who it was. The sense of dread he'd had all day intensified as Sören could hear Dooku's basso muffled, rising and falling, a weird tense energy wafting down from there – tense enough

that Sören thought about going down there to check on him, but he didn't want to intrude on the call.

A few minutes later, Dooku came out from the hallway, looking as if he'd seen a ghost. Sören *felt* it before he saw it, melancholy rising like a tidal wave.
"What, Nico?" Sören asked.

Dooku cleared his throat, his eyes apologetic and mournful.

"It must be important," Maglor said, and Sören nodded.

Dooku looked down, then he took a deep breath and looked up. "That was Obi, calling from London. Qui-Gon's dead."

Sören's jaw dropped. "Qui. Is... dead."

"Yes." Dooku took a seat on the couch.

Maglor handled putting the rest of the groceries away, while Sören just held Dooku, not knowing what to say. Dooku wasn't crying - not yet, though his eyes were too bright with unshed, threatened tears. He had an incredibly sad, haunted look on his face, one that Sören would have done anything, given anything, to take away.

Dooku had two unofficially adopted children - Joaquin "Qui-Gon" Gonzalez, a veterinarian, and Leja Bollasdóttir Sulu, a gallery owner, both Force-sensitive. Since Letitia Fetherstonhaugh, their handler who was a member of a branch of MI6 dedicated to protecting Force-sensitives – and protecting the public from Force-sensitives – had told them last year to delete their social media profiles and be more circumspect with what they said over the phone and online, and video chat was right out, it had been much harder for Dooku to keep in touch with them, and Qui-Gon had started to take that personally.

To try to mend fences, Qui-Gon and his partner Oberon “Obi” Canobie had both been invited to Christmas last year, with Leja, and Dooku finally told them his secret in-person – he had accepted the offer of immortality from a god. He had to prove it, allowing Qui to wound him and watching the speed healing. Qui then told Dooku he wasn't comfortable with the idea of "cheating death" on a world that was overpopulated, had environmental problems and so many societal ills. He gave Dooku a bit of a philosophical lecture about the cycles of death and rebirth being necessary to the balance of life on the planet, which Dooku took personally as a condemnation of his choice to become immortal, which he'd done out of love for Sören and Maglor - Maglor who did not need to be lectured about such things, with the kind of experiences he'd had. Qui and Dooku henceforth had a bit of a falling-out and had kept distance from each other, and Leja, claiming she was put in the middle and didn't want to take sides between them, nonetheless seemed to side with Qui-Gon and Obi, falling out of touch with Dooku all but occasionally.

They had all known since then, of course, that the day would come when Qui, Obi, and Leja would die, but none of them were expecting Qui-Gon to die now. Qui-Gon was only ten years Dooku's junior - sixty-two years old, which was not even really old these days - and he'd been in what seemed like good health.

Maglor came out with a bottle of Auchentoshan and shot glasses, and took a seat on the other side of Dooku on the couch. Maglor poured shots for all of them.

Dooku knocked back a glass of Auchentoshan, neat. He frowned and leaned back against the couch. Maglor had an arm around him and Sören's hand was on Dooku's knee. Dooku

reached for Sören's hand, holding it; Sören rubbed his thumb against Dooku's hand tenderly.

"So Obi called you," Sören said. "After all this time and distance and tension, he at least had the courtesy and decency to let you know Qui passed on..."

"Sudden heart attack," Dooku said. "And..." Dooku snorted. His nostrils flared and brow furrowed with indignance. "You needn't call it courtesy and decency – Qui has been dead for several days and he decided to wait until now to tell me. As you know, today is Wednesday. The wake is *Saturday*. Afternoon. He said, 'Oh, I know you probably can't make it on such short notice, but...'" His nostrils flared again. "Hmph. I feel *obligated* to attend now, short notice or no. Whatever Obi might think of me at the moment, whatever Qui-Gon may have thought of me, *he was still my son.* And I shan't prove whatever it is Obi and Leja want to think of me by not attending. That said... it *is* on very, very short notice. I was planning on calling our friend Letitia when I've had a bit of time to clear my head here, to ask her to procure tickets for my departure and return, as you know she has told us to let her handle things when we leave the country, but I imagine she won't be thrilled with my request -"

Maglor put up a hand. "Don't ask Letitia."

Dooku glared at Maglor. "Don't tell me not to attend this wake, Macalaurë. I *must*. Dear as you are to me, you shan't stop me. *No one* can," he said, glaring over at Sören now as well, though Sören knew better after close to three years together than to get in Dooku's way.

"Nicolae, I did not tell you to not go to the wake." Maglor gave him a stern look in return. "I told you not to ask Letitia about a flight there and back." Maglor pursed his lips. "Do you remember summer 2019, when I was visiting Svalbarðseyri and then I said I had to go to London on very short notice for emergency business and I came back and then you heard about the death of Justin Roberts on the news?"

"I remember," Dooku said, nodding.

Sören also nodded - the abuse from Justin, the repeated rapes, still haunted him years later, and though he'd had some initial discomfort with the idea of Justin being murdered, he was still touched that Maglor had gone to that length to avenge him.

Maglor went on. "Anyway... when I went to London to... handle all of that. I didn't fly there. I didn't want to take the risk of leaving a trail that could be followed back to me in case things got hot. I used the portal at the Dimmuborgir." Maglor and Sören had told Dooku about the portals; Ingwion had taken Sören through one last year, from the Dimmuborgir to Avebury and then to Uluru, to show him how they worked.

"So you're suggesting I use the portal," Dooku said. "That seems rather extreme just to avoid annoying Letitia -"

"I don't care whether Letitia is annoyed or not," Maglor said bluntly. "It's her job to deal with us and all the curveballs we throw her and her agents. My reasoning for asking you to take the portal is more straightforward. We've all been feeling a disturbance in the Force. While Qui-Gon's death surely accounts for some of that, this feels... deeper. I feel like whatever it is, there's more margin for problems taking a flight - I for one would prefer that you not be *in a plane flying over an ocean* until we know what this disturbance is and we've... dealt with it."

"Fair," Dooku said. "Where was the other terminus of the portal, when you arrived in

England?"

"There are several I could have used," Maglor said. "I went with Wayland's Smithy as it's more quiet... less-trafficked... less chance of being seen. London has been having some nice rain and fog as of late, it should be safe for you to materialize over there."

"All right." Dooku nodded. "That's about..." He did the mental math. "A two-hour drive from London, judging from the last time I visited the Smithy."

"Oh, you've been?" Sören's eyebrows went up in surprise.

Dooku nodded again. "Even though I pursued a career in law, history has always been a passion of mine, and in the 1980s and 1990s I did some traveling around the country to visit certain ancient sites. It was intriguing. Qui went with me for some of it so this seems rather... apt." Dooku readied his cell phone again and dialed the number that had just called him. After two rings Obi picked up. "Hello, Obi? This is Dooku again. Yes. The wake is at 1 PM on Saturday, you said? I'll be there."

"I'm coming with you," Sören hissed, not wanting Dooku to be alone during this difficult time.

"And Sören is coming with me." A pause, as Obi spoke on his end, a note of surprise in his muffled voice. "Yes, I know it's short notice, but it's also a... short flight." A wry smile. "But if you wouldn't mind terribly, would you be willing to pick me and Sören up? We're... taking a trip to Wayland's Smithy... in Qui's honor. As you know, Qui-Gon went with me to see several historic sites around the UK, when he was younger." Dooku glanced at Sören, as Obi's voice rose and fell on his end, and Dooku nodded to himself. "10 AM pickup, Sören? That gives us two hours to get to London for the wake, with an hour to spare."

Sören frowned. He wasn't a morning person, and they'd have to leave earlier than 10 AM to get to the Dimmuborgir and even just dress up in something befitting a funeral. Sören hadn't worn a suit in years. A suit and doing things in the morning - not his idea of a good time. But then, neither was leaving Dooku alone when he was hurting like this. Sören gave the thumbs up.

More of Obi's voice. "All right," Dooku said finally. "We'll see you then." He hit End, and exhaled sharply. This time Dooku was the one to use the Force to pour himself a glass of whisky.

"I'm very sorry about this," Dooku said, patting Sören's hands.

Sören shrugged. "Shit happens. Not your fault Qui is dead." He felt a sharp pang - he'd been fond of Qui-Gon, before the falling-out, though they didn't know each other well. Mostly, he hurt for Dooku, knowing behind that British stiff upper lip his husband was feeling devastated, most of all because Dooku and Qui-Gon had not reconciled before this and now of course it was too late. He could *feel* Dooku's regret across their Force bond. He also knew Dooku was going to keep up the stiff upper lip for awhile longer.

That would not, however, prevent Sören from showing him tenderness. He kissed the tip of Dooku's nose. Then he had an idea. He got up and went to the studio, where he kept the Silmaril he'd found on his birthday last year. He came back in the living room with it, warm and pulsing in his hand, and used the Force to float it over to Dooku.

"It's beautiful," Dooku said.

"Touch it," Sören said. "It'll be fine. I did make those in honor of you and Arafinwë, after all."

Dooku opened his hand and the Silmaril floated down into his palm. Dooku held it reverently, rubbing his thumb over it, eyes wide with awe.

"I remember when you first showed us," Dooku said, his voice hushed.

Sören nodded. "*See how I love you.*"

Dooku and Sören looked at each other - looked into each other's eyes - and there were Dooku's dark chocolate eyes, warm and filled with love for his husband, and then Sören saw the blue eyes of Fingolfin, like blue diamonds but even more exquisite... reminiscent of a blue sky with cloud iridescence, a memory of the first taste of freedom Fëanor had outside of Valinor. And Finarfin's hair had reminded Fëanor of the mingled light of Telperion and Laurelin, the sacred "in between" time, one of the wonders of Valinor, one of the things he could never hate about the realm, one of the things he loved, cherished, even as he'd come to hate the realm's strictures, its Laws. Oh, how Fëanor had raged at the destruction of the Trees...

Dooku and Sören kissed, as Fëanor had kissed Fingolfin and Finarfin in turn when the Silmarils were unveiled. Dooku stroked Sören's face and pet his curls with his free hand, as Sören's hand settled on top of the Silmaril in Dooku's hand, the stone throbbing between them. As the kiss deepened, Sören had a mind to drag Dooku down to the bedroom and celebrate the Silmarils by claiming something else that was diamond-hard, but he could sense across their Force bond that Dooku was too upset over Qui-Gon's death to be in the mood for that right now. He understood. Their noses rubbed as their lips pulled apart, lingering, breathing each other's breath.

"I put a piece of my soul into these," Sören said, taking the Silmaril now, holding it in both his hands, looking at it with wonder. "Because it was made for the love of you, my brothers... you are my soul. My light. I wanted to infuse it with the light you bring to my life. It's magic. Joy. Hope. I know you need to grieve, but I don't want you to feel like, between this – and whatever that bad feeling we all have is – that all hope is gone." He passed the Silmaril back to Dooku.

Dooku held the Silmaril, closed his eyes and let out a shuddery sigh. The tears began to flow just slightly. Not a big scene, not yet. That dam would break later. But for now, a pressure release. "I love you," Dooku said, the weight of years in his voice.

Sören kissed his cheek, his tears. "I know."

–

Sören and Dooku almost fell over as they came out at Wayland's Smithy, into rain and fog.

I'd almost forgotten how intense that jump is, Sören spoke into Dooku's mind via their Force bond. *Maglor once called it "folding space", but it's more like space is being folded into you, into your goddamn guts -*

"Er," Dooku said aloud. He reflexively brushed himself off, even though they hadn't fallen, only came close to it, and they hadn't gotten anything on themselves in the jump.

Dooku was wearing one of the suits he'd kept from his days working as a barrister at Garden Court Chambers, at Lincoln's Inn Fields in Temple, a smart black pinstripe suit with a white shirt and a deep navy tie. Sören was wearing a charcoal grey suit with a white shirt and grey tie - and his Doc Martens boots - feeling like he was performing some sort of drag badly. Dooku took his arm and popped open the navy umbrella he'd brought, with Sören shaking his head and chuckling that even Dooku's umbrella went with his outfit.

Though Maglor had assumed based on the weather that they would be alone and unseen when they jumped into Wayland's Smithy - not to mention that it was a Monday morning and most people were working or at school - his assumption wasn't quite accurate. Sören's heart skipped a beat, an icy grip on the pit of his stomach as he saw, several meters away, a group of thuggish-looking young white males drinking ale from bottles way too early in the morning, smoking cigarettes. Sören wondered if they'd been spotted. His nose twitched and wrinkled involuntarily at the foul smell of the cigarette smoke.

"Just act like nothing is unusual," Dooku said quietly, and Sören felt Dooku's touch in the Force around them, a thin invisible shield. Across their Force bond, Sören realized Dooku used to do this before certain fraught court cases he took on, when Dooku was a criminal defense barrister and had particularly dangerous clients - or people out for blood and vengeance upon those clients.

The gang of louts was still staring at them as they passed. Dooku made eye contact, razor-sharp, like an eagle seeing its lunch. "Good morning, gentlemen," Dooku said mildly with a nod, continuing to walk past the non-gentlemen, one of whom sneered.

There was a navy blue Volvo waiting for them - Sören recognized the auburn-haired-and-bearded Oberon Canobie in the driver's seat, looking impatient. "Do you think we were spotted?" Sören whispered to Dooku.

"I think it probably doesn't matter if we were or weren't," Dooku said. "You saw them. They'll be distracted soon enough."

Sören supposed Dooku was right, he'd seen plenty of the type in London and they seemed to have short attention spans, an alien could have landed at a pub and if telly showed England scoring a goal they'd ignore the alien completely, and Dooku had pushed with the Force on top of that. He still felt slightly uneasy, worrying about the sneering one in particular. But before he could tell Dooku they might want to turn around and maybe try to plant a Force suggestion in that one's head, they were getting in Obi's car.

"Hello," Obi said as they climbed in.

"Good morning, Obi," Dooku said. "How are you holding up?"

A thin, bitter smile. "Don't ask."

They drove into London in silence. It was painfully awkward, and Sören was almost regretting insisting on coming along, but every now and again he stole glances at Dooku in the back seat, via the mirror in the front, and the pain in Dooku's face - the pain he *felt*, across their bond - reminded him he had to do this.

The wake was small, and less formal than Sören had been expecting, and probably quite

a bit less formal than Dooku himself had been expecting. Though Obi himself was in a black suit and tie, and everyone was dressed in suits - including Leja, who Sören spied out of the corner of his eye - the ceremony was loosely structured, people getting up to say a few words about Qui. Sören wondered if Dooku was going to say anything, but as the service wore on he realized Dooku couldn't bring himself to get up and make any kind of speech - Dooku, the master of monologues, who had once been a great courtroom manipulator. It hurt *that* much.

At the end there was a viewing of the body, people getting in a queue. Dooku had already told Sören that Qui was in fact "*dead* dead", this wasn't a faked death, but seeing the body absolutely confirmed it, and Sören found himself gasping and swearing in Icelandic at the sight, even as Qui - in a dark blue suit and tie, which Sören swore Qui would have never voluntarily worn in his life, hands clasped on his chest as if in prayer - looked absolutely serene, like his heart attack had taken him quickly, mercifully. Sören backed away from the corpse as fast as he could, making a beeline for the table of refreshments, distracting himself from the sick feeling he had by pouring himself punch, feeling shaken. Out of the corner of his eye he watched Dooku lingering at the body, as if Dooku was expressing something to Qui-Gon's spirit via the Force that he couldn't put into words.

"Are you all right, dear?" came a deep female voice, Londoner, well-bred.

"Jæja, I'm... I'm fine, *takk.*" Sören had a sip of punch and watched the woman the voice belonged to, almost as tall as he was, with steel-grey hair in a pixie cut, watchful green eyes behind wire-rimmed glasses, a slim and elegant figure in a deep navy pantsuit. She was more handsome than pretty, but could have been a model when she was younger.

The woman nodded. "I hate going to these things, and I hate it even more when I know the person who died isn't stuffy and wouldn't approve of being 'honored' this way." She made air quotes. Her nostrils flared and then she gave Sören a small, wry smile as she went on, "I told my son that when I die - mind you, that shouldn't be for some time yet - I want a New Orleans style jazz funeral, none of... this nonsense. Remember my life as I lived it, with heart."

Sören instantly liked her. He also felt a weird prickle at the back of his neck that he couldn't explain. He raised his punch glass. "I can see why you and Qui got on."

"We were neighbors," the woman said, "not the best of friends - good fences make good neighbors, as they say, it doesn't do to get too wrapped up in each other's space, but for what it was, I was fond of him. And he was a dear when my poor ragdoll cat had to be put down." She frowned.

Sören watched as Leja took Dooku aside for a moment, the first conversation those two were having in months. He had to do a double-take, almost not recognizing Leja at first, who looked alarmingly thin and was wearing a large floppy hat, and Leja never wore hats, not even at formal events.

"You came a long way for this, hm?" The woman tilted her head to one side.

Sören gave a small nod. "Iceland."

"He must have been important to you." The woman put a comforting hand on his arm. "I'm sorry for your loss."

"*Takk,*" Sören said, his voice husky with emotion. And that kind, compassionate touch from a stranger, the knowing eyes, made Sören start to blubber, even as he hadn't been

that close to Qui-Gon, more fondness from a distance, sort of like an adult stepson. Sören cringed, self-conscious about starting to cry in public. "Oh god, I'm so sorry," he said, wrenching away from her grip.

The woman put her arms around him, giving a tight hug. "It's all right, dear. People shouldn't be robots when they grieve the ones that mattered to them."

Sören grieved Qui more for Dooku than himself, but he would miss Qui nonetheless - and he was grieving all the everything, right now.

The woman offered him a handkerchief, which looked suspiciously similar to the handkerchief Dooku offered at their first meeting in 2017. Sören hesitated, and the woman began dabbing at Sören's face.

"My maternal instinct kicks in," she said. "How old are you, dear?"

"Thirty-five, will be thirty-six soon." *Not that it matters anymore.*

"So just a little younger than my son." She dabbed some more at Sören's face. Then she took Sören's face in her hands and she said, her voice firm and commanding, "You are going to be OK. I know it may not seem like that right now, with your friend gone, but I *promise* you, life keeps going on, and all we can do is keep moving with it. We can be pulled into the undertow, or we can swim like sharks." Another wry smile. She patted Sören's shoulder.

Then Dooku came over, glancing at the woman and then at Sören. Seeming to intuitively understand the need for Dooku to interrupt, the woman nodded at Sören with a tight smile and stepped aside and began walking away.

"You talked to Leja," Sören said matter-of-factly.

"I did," Dooku said. He watched Obi at Qui-Gon's coffin now. Leja was already heading out of the building. He took Sören's hands in his and he said softly, "She has cancer."

"Oh. Well I mean, when you say she has cancer... prognosis?"

"Not good." Dooku pursed his lips. "Matter of weeks."

Sören threw his arms around Dooku and hugged him tight, fierce, almost angry in his need to shelter, protect. "Oh god, Nico, I'm so sorry..."

"So am I," Dooku said, holding Sören too, leaning on him. He gave a deep sigh.

Even though they were out in public and Dooku was still somewhat reserved about certain displays of affection in public, Sören stroked Dooku's face, pet and skritched his beard. "I love you," Sören husked.

"I know." Dooku took Sören's hand and kissed it. "I love you too."

Obi finally came over. "Would you like to come over for tea?"

Dooku and Sören looked at each other, then Dooku nodded and Sören did too.

Obi and Qui-Gon had shared a place together in Blackheath, a cozy little gingerbread house that Sören half-expected to find populated by a crone baking children. There were

neatly manicured rose bushes outside, climbing roses on the roof, and shrubbery around the parameter of the house. It had been a long time since Sören had been inside their place, but he remembered there seemed to be just as many plants inside - Qui-Gon was a bonsai enthusiast and there had been hanging plants, safely out of the reach of their five cats.

Sören was shocked when he got inside their house and found boxes, boxes everywhere. The couch was still there, for now, but other furniture was pushed off to the side, on its way out. There were none of Qui-Gon's plants left. There were, however, the cats. A smoke point Siamese with bright blue eyes came right up to Sören with a "Prrrp?"

"Oh yes, I think I remember you," Sören said, stooping to pet the cat, "but you have so many brothers and sisters I forget your name -"

"That's Craig," Obi said. "Please, sit down."

Obi put on tea and when it was ready he came out, taking a desk chair that didn't really belong where it was, across the coffee table in front of the couch.

"So you're leaving," Dooku said.

"In about a fortnight, yes," Obi said.

"Where are you going to go?"

"Arizona, for starters." Obi shrugged. "I need... solitude, for awhile. Space to grieve. The desert is a good place for that."

"Fair," Dooku said.

"Actually, that's..." Obi gave a small, sad smile. "That's why I invited you over.*As you know...*" Even in grief, he couldn't resist taking the potshot; Sören bit back a grin. "Qui and I had five cats. They were like our children."

"You say 'had', past tense, but they're around," Dooku said, gesturing to the other four cats who had come out to see the visitors. A large orange tabby promptly hopped up onto the couch and climbed on Dooku's lap, sniffing Dooku and Sören, who began to pet.

"Moving animals anywhere is difficult, moving them cross-country is... well... quite a challenge indeed," Obi said. "I can take exactly two of the five cats. I'm taking Victor," he said, gesturing to a black cat batting a toy mouse around by the fireplace, "and Francesca." He pointed to a long-haired calico hopping onto a windowsill to watch the rain. "I need to rehome the other three, and I know that Qui would have wanted you to take at least one."

"Would he." Dooku's eyebrow shot up at that and he sipped his tea.

"Whatever he thought of you in the end - and he never hated you, Dooku, you know that - he knows how much of a cat person you are. You both are," Obi quickly added, glancing at Sören.

Dooku and Sören looked at each other. Then a silver Norwegian Forest Cat who looked for all the world like Dooku's late cat Dragos got on the couch and climbed on Sören.

"That's Rasputin," Obi said with a smirk. "He's about a year old, we got him after Jules

passed on late last year."

"I'm sorry. I had no idea about Jules -" Dooku frowned.

"I know," Obi said.

"Rasputin, eh?" Sören felt a twinge, remembering how Boney M.'s "Rasputin" became his ringtone for Ingwion when he'd been visiting in summer 2019, when Sören - incorrectly - thought Ingwion was Russian. He began to sing, "*Ra-Ra-Rasputin, lover of the Russian queen, there was a cat that really was gone...*"

Dooku reached out to pet Rasputin, with his other hand stroking the orange cat on his lap, and Sören noticed from what he could see of Dooku's wrist as his hand moved that he had gooseflesh, as if Dooku had the same frisson about Rasputin - he'd been in on the joke, much as it made him roll his eyes - and was very well aware that Rasputin was the spitting image of the cat he'd lost to renal failure in spring 2018. *Maybe Huan isn't the only reincarnated four-legged friend around,* Sören thought to himself.

"I think we've been claimed," Dooku said, looking at Sören, who nodded. Then Dooku looked at Obi. "What about... er..."

"Craig?" Obi glanced down at the Siamese, who was rubbing around his ankles as if to say, "*What about me?*" "Well," Obi said, "I was thinking of giving a cat to Elaine, my neighbor - Qui would have wanted that, too. Actually, if you don't mind, you can come with me while I bring the cat over to Elaine's, and then I can drive you to the airport -"

"You've already done enough driving," Dooku said, and Sören knew that even though Obi was Force-sensitive and well aware of the weirdness going on with Maglor and having two immortals sit in front of him, Dooku still didn't want to disclose how they'd gotten there. "I'll call a taxi. But we'll go with you to drop off the other cat. I assume you have cat carriers, because we don't, we weren't expecting -"

"I do," Obi said. "I'll bring you back here to fetch the carriers and the cats before you head off."

"What's his name?" Sören asked, petting the orange tabby.

"She. Pumpkin," Obi said.

"D'aawwww."

Sören would normally be a bit weirded out by the prospect of going to a total stranger's house, and wouldn't have expected a neighbor in a posh, well-to-do neighborhood like this to be at home on a Monday afternoon instead of working. But, with Dooku beside him, under the umbrella, Obi led the way two houses down, Craig howling in the cat carrier.

"I need reinforcement to do this," Obi explained to them sotto voce. "This hasn't been an easy decision..."

Now Sören understood a little better. Whatever bitterness he could have felt towards Obi for enabling the distance with Qui, and not telling Dooku about the heart attack until just before the wake, was fading now, replaced with compassion.

If Qui-Gon and Obi lived in a gingerbread house, their neighbor Elaine lived in something straight out of *Upstairs, Downstairs* or *Mary Poppins*. Sören fought off a giggle at how

Very British this whole experience was, like suddenly his life had become a Victorian novel for an afternoon. And then the humor rolled away when he felt a prickle at the back of his neck and a weird *I know this place, somehow*feeling. *The fuck is this.*

The door opened and there was the woman Sören had interacted with at the wake. "Obi," she said, warmly, making a sweeping "come in" gesture. "I see you've brought friends." Her eyes met Sören's.

"This is Sören, and Nicolae," Obi said. Then Obi raised the carrier. "And this is Craig." His voice lowered as he said, "You know I'm leaving for the States, soon. I wanted to ask if you'd -"

Elaine nodded. "I'd been contemplating getting a new cat after Alonzo passed on..."

Sören's eyes lit up. "Alonzo. After one of the Jellicle Cats?"

"*Yes.* You know the one." Elaine looked delighted that Sören got the reference. Then she opened Craig's cat carrier herself and pulled out the Siamese. "Oh, what a precious boy." Craig began to purr loudly.

Sören felt that prickle at the back of his neck. It wasn't just that he knew this house somehow, he knew *her*. He tried to get a lock on it but it was fuzzy, probably through the noise of Dooku's grief and his own pain,.

And this house. Dooku and Sören looked around. "This is a*lovely* place," Dooku said. Sören nodded. There was a sweeping white staircase, and dark wood floors. The ceiling was high, with a chandelier. Plaster flowers along the top of the walls, the walls done in grey paint. There were large windows seemingly everywhere, filling the house with light. Metalwork sculptures and wall hangings, abstract art on the walls. Through some of the windows Sören saw a walled garden outside, shrubbery, vines, and pots.

"I restored and redesigned it," Elaine said. "My son was about four when I bought this place. I'm an architect by trade and have a large portfolio to be proud of, but this... this is my pride and joy. My castle."

"It's gorgeous," Sören said, his voice hushed.

"Let me show you the garden while Craig does some exploring," Elaine said, and gestured for Sören and Dooku and Obi to follow.

Sören's breath caught at the lavender, wisteria, clematis, sage, chives, creeping roses, the trellises. The faded grey brick walls seemed to thrum with the energy of the Living Force in this place, the plants happy and well-loved.

"This was my late husband Roger's sanctuary," Elaine said. "Enough so that he asked to have some of his ashes scattered here, when he went. I have some and our son has the rest... but he's a part of the garden he loved, now. I don't have the green thumb he did, but my son does - he's got rather a gift - so when he's around the garden is his baby."

Sören walked around, feeling like he was in a dream. Then, as his back turned to the others for a moment, a few meters away, he felt that prickle at the back of his neck again but now there was a chill down his entire spine, hair standing on end, breaking out in gooseflesh under his suit. The rain had stopped and the sunlight was starting to break through clouds, casting a golden tint to the air, and he felt something silver-gold brush his mind. A deep female voice spoke into his mind: *Uncle.*

In his mind's eye Sören saw Galadriel looking into her mirror, clad in white, glowing as brightly as Maglor did unglamoured.

When Dag's daughters were born back in March and Sören had visited him in Canada for the birth, Dag had casually mentioned that Galadriel had "poked" him a couple of times, and she did it again when his daughters were born. This, however, was the first time Galadriel had reached out to Sören himself, that he was aware of.

Hello, Sören spoke back to her mind.

Galadriel looked pensive. She closed her eyes. *The days grow dark, Fëanáro.*

So you feel it too, then.

Galadriel's eyes opened. *Yes. Whatever it is, no world shall be the same.*

I am afraid. Sören hated admitting that, but there it was.

Have courage, Uncle. A pause. *Have fire. Take hold of the Flame and do not let go. For you are the light of all worlds.*

Sören didn't know what to say to that, and Galadriel's presence lingered in his mind, as if she was waiting for him to say something, anything. He looked around the garden again and at last he went out on a limb - if the *palantir* wouldn't give him a straight answer, maybe she would.

Artanis. Sören closed his eyes, to lock onto her energy more fully.*Where is your father.*

A wind stirred. *Closer than you think.*

The connection broke after that, like a phone being hung up. Though it wasn't a straight answer of any kind, Sören was still rocked enough by it - by all of it - that the rest of the visit with Obi's neighbor Elaine passed by in a haze. When they got back to Obi's house, Obi went to the bathroom and Dooku used the opportunity to call a taxi, explaining they were going to Wayland's Smithy. "Yes, I know that will be expensive," Dooku huffed, rolling his eyes.

When they waited outside for the cab, Sören's mind replayed the conversation with Galadriel for seemingly the fiftieth time. He got the distinct sense that Elaine, though she felt familiar, was not his niece reborn, and that his niece hadn't been reborn - Galadriel was poking at him from Valinor, or perhaps someplace else entirely. As far as "closer than you think" with Finarfin, he didn't sense it was the ashes of the deceased in the garden, as strong as that place had felt in the Living Force. And it wasn't Obi, or that would have come out at Margrét and Frankie's wedding when all the other revelations were happening.

So what did "closer than you think" mean? Sören wanted to scream with frustration.

He held that thought as the cab came. Dooku got in the back with the two cat carriers, Sören in the front passenger's seat. Their driver was Sikh, and polite, asking if the temperature was comfortable, if they wanted to listen to anything on the way there. Dooku and Sören opted to let their driver listen to what he wanted, and he put on classical music, which Dooku smiled at in approval.

Just as they passed Elaine's house, close to being out of the neighborhood, Sören heard a bass thumping, and his eyes followed the direction of the music. A charcoal grey Audi A7 was turning into the street, and Sören's lips quirked with amusement at the familiar sound of Jamiroquai.

You make me love you, love you baby
With a little L
Why does it have to be like this
I can never tell

As the Audi passed by their cab on the other side, Sören once again felt a prickle at the back of his neck, this time in combination with another round of his hair standing on end, a feeling that he *knew* that car the way he knew Elaine and knew that house. He also felt the presence of the Force - just for a few seconds, like the volume on the Force energy present between himself and Dooku at any given time was turned up, and then deliberately muted, as if Sören feeling it caused it to go off.

Sören wondered about that, and then he found himself getting distracted, for some reason compelled to look out the window at Blackheath Station, coming up, a reminder of the days when he'd lived in London and used to take the Tube on a regular basis, though he'd rarely had occasion to go into Blackheath.

Sören felt a little dazed, which he chalked up to having to go out in the morning, and a portal jump, and all the everything all day, all of yesterday, but not so dazed that he didn't notice the Audi tearing out of the neighborhood as if it had turned around as fast as it had gone in. He wondered what that was about just before a yawn hit him and he gave a sleepy blink, leaning back in his chair and letting the classical music on the radio lull him into a half-asleep state.

He woke up a bit when they had been on the highway for awhile. Dooku was sweet-talking the cats in their carriers to keep them calm for the road. No more familiar cars... and then, in the mirror on his side of the car, another grey Audi, or perhaps the same one, two cars behind.

*Well, that's weird, but then, probably not the most unique car in the world.*Sören decided to poke Dooku across their Force bond. *Nico, did you... get a message when we were in the garden?*

No, Dooku spoke back into his mind. *You?*

Yeah. Galadriel, Sören said.

I see.

*Apparently she feels it too, that disturbance in the Force,*Sören said. *Which is... concerning.*

Sören started to doze off again, until their driver informed them, "Just a few more minutes, OK?"

Sören nodded. He blinked his eyes open and then he saw the Audi right on their ass in the passenger's side mirror.

We're being followed.

Keep calm, Dooku spoke into Sören's mind.

The Audi turned off suddenly, as if they somehow caught on to what was happening, or perhaps they really weren't being followed and that was just a coincidence, and they arrived at Wayland's Smithy without a tail. When Dooku and Sören got out of the cab, Dooku paid their fare and left a very generous tip, which the driver tried to argue about, "no no no, is too much," and Dooku gave him a stern look, not taking no for an answer. Finally Sören grabbed Dooku's arm, and the driver called out to them, "Thank you so much! Have a wonderful day!"

Sören and Dooku were each carrying a cat carrier. As they got closer to the megalith, saw a different group of louts than had been there this morning - but there was the one who had sneered from the first group, as if he'd brought a second group of friends. Once again Sören's panic button went off, and he wanted to kick himself for not saying something to Dooku. And he could see it on Dooku's face, the look of surprise and concern, as if in his haze of grief Dooku's usual watchful, suspicious nature had relaxed a little too much.

Keep walking, Dooku spoke into Sören's mind.

"Hey," said the guy from earlier. "Where you two off to?" And then a pause, and another sneer. "Where you two *come from*?"

Don't answer him. Don't look at him. Now it was Dooku grabbing Sören's arm, marching him on ahead, past the young men.

Sören heard the purr of an engine, like a car had just rolled up. He thought about looking over his shoulder but he took Dooku's caution to heart, that looking at the car would also mean looking at the thugs. Then the guy hollered, "HEY! I ASKED YOU A FUCKIN' QUESTION!"

Dooku and Sören were high-tailing it now, not quite breaking into a run, but almost there, trying to get to the chamber. Sören heard a car door open and he felt Dooku's Force energy rising, coiling, about to strike if things escalated. The chamber was starting to glow faintly and thrum, as if it sensed them coming and was warming up. A rock struck Sören in the shoulder and he whirled around, his arm tingling, his hand hot, and he saw the guy who yelled at him - ready to throw another rock, this one larger - suddenly trip and fall on the ground, just as Dooku shoved Sören into the chamber.

Everything went white; with their free arms, Dooku and Sören grabbed onto each other for dear life. Falling falling falling flying...

—

When they arrived at the Dimmuborgir, Dooku called Maglor, letting him know they were back and needed a ride. It was raining now, which seemed apt for the somber mood.

As they sat at the Dimmuborgir and waited for their pickup, Sören asked Dooku, "Uh, when we were, you know, at Wayland's Smithy and that guy started throwing rocks..." He tilted his head. "Did you..."

Their eyes met. "No. I did not."

Did I do that? Without thinking about it? It wouldn't have been the first time Sören used

the Force without thinking, but usually he was more careful than that, even when his anxiety was running high - otherwise Justin Roberts would have died years ago.

Not that it was necessarily the Force, either. Could be that guy just tripped. He was pretty drunk, after all.

Sören tried to not dwell on it too much and focus on comforting the cats, who were once again unhappy about being cooped up, and he couldn't imagine what the jump through the Portal had been like for them. As it was Sören still felt a little sick to his stomach.

When Maglor's jeep rolled up, Sören was never so relieved to see him. Maglor gave them an incredulous look when they got in the car with the cat carriers. "I thought you were going to a wake," Maglor said.

"We did. Obi needed to rehome some of their cats because he's moving," Sören said.

Maglor's lips quirked with amusement. "This is three cats we'll have now." Then Maglor scowled. "We don't have a vial of blood like we did for Huan."

"Maybe we can ask Flóki for his, he's a god too." Sören wondered if he'd ever see Ingwion again.

"That would be the plan, yes," Dooku said, and Sören twinged, knowing Dooku didn't want to go through the trauma of losing another cat, especially not now after everything.

"It doesn't bother you that we seem to be creating an army of immortal felines here," Maglor said, raising an eyebrow.

"Sounds just like what the world needs," Sören said. "Get us home, I have to piss like a fucking racehorse."

Maglor facepalmed, chuckling, and then he gave Sören a mock salute. "Aye, Captain."

"Warp six," Sören said, as Maglor began pulling out of the Dimmuborgir. "Engage."

A few minutes onto the road, Sören's cell phone went off. He thought about ignoring it, because any movement seemed to exacerbate his urge to pee and he really didn't want to ask Maglor to pull over so he could go on the side of the road. But then he got a nagging sense that he should, in fact, answer his phone. When he used the Force to slide the phone out of his pocket, his eyes widened with alarm when he saw Letitia Fetherstonhaugh's number on the screen.

Sören swiped to accept. "Hey."

"I'm going to say this to you *once*, Sigurðsson." She knew that was a patronymic and not a surname and she only called him that when she was *really* annoyed with him and wanted to annoy him in return - which, thankfully, hadn't been often. Much. "*Don't you FUCKING do that again.*"

"Do what?" Sören asked.

"You know perfectly damn well what. You were in London today."

Oh shit. "...Er."

"One of my flying monkeys -" That was her code word for MI6 operatives, when on the phone in these types of discussions. "- had to contain a situation. Which was not really something he was bargaining on having to do today, so now I've got an earful from him, which means you're getting an earful from me. The next time you want to go galavanting around the gates or whatever you lot are calling them -"

"So how do you even know about that? Did Ingmar tell you?"

"We've had people look at things, including the gentleman who just screamed at me for the last fifteen minutes. It's not something I particularly care to discuss over the phone because unlike *some fucking people* I understand the concept of discretion. *So.* As I was *saying*, Sigurðsson, the next time you want to do THAT, you fucking bloody tell me first, that you're going somewhere, so I can get a crew in to monitor if you're coming out someplace with traffic. This isn't going to happen again, or I'm going to have no choice but to get you lot a babysitter and I don't think you want to be kept on so tight a leash, do you?"

Sören swallowed hard. "No ma'am." *Even if I normally like being on a leash.*

"All right then." *Click.*

Sören took a few deep breaths. "That was Letitia."

"I rather got that sense," Dooku said. "How much trouble are we in?"

"Well... we're always in trouble. We are trouble, period. But jæja, she's pretty pissed right now."

Despite all of the non-normal activity of most of their day, and their weekend, things quickly returned to something resembling their "usual" routine in the evening, with Dooku and Maglor making dinner, and then Maglor improvising on the harp while Sören worked on a sketch. He found himself sketching Galadriel, and then in Sören's mind's eye he could see Maglor's own mental images as he played, remembering Elrond, Elros.

Remembering war. Remembering what it felt like. How each war had changed him. Feeling weary into his bones that war was upon them again.

Maglor went to take Huan out, and Sören took a shower. After the shower, Sören found Dooku on the bed in his pajamas, curled up in the fetal position, holding his ancient teddy bear, Winston, a look of raw grief on his face. Rasputin was on one side of him and Snúður the other. Pumpkin crept into the room.

Sören quickly got in his own pajamas and climbed on the bed with Dooku, with Huan making some room for Sören. Sören pulled Dooku into his arms and began gently rocking him, a tight lump in his throat.

A few minutes of rocking and the dam started to break. Sören knew that it wouldn't be the only time Dooku would cry about this, and probably not the hardest time, either, but it was a start. "Let it out," Sören said, petting him. "I know it hurts, and you shouldn't keep it inside..."

“It feels like the world is ending.”

"It feels like that," Sören said, nodding, "but *as you know*, feelings and reality aren't necessarily in agreement. The world hasn't ended yet. I'm still here. And I'm not going

anywhere, Nico. I'm not going to leave you." He kissed Dooku's tears.

"You *did*, once." Dooku was referring back to when they were Fingolfin and Fëanor.

"Jæja, and I was a big stupid poopyhead," Sören said, desperately grabbing for what levity he could. "But you won't lose me again. *I swear it.*" He grabbed Dooku's hand and pressed it to his heart, squeezing it. "I will never just... take off... again. I will never, ever leave you again." Another grasp at levity. "For fuck's sake, I'm going to take the day off to go with you to the wake... and I'm going somewhere that isn't work, willingly, *in the bloody morning*. That should tell you a lot."

Dooku tried to smile, but it didn't meet his eyes, which were too sad. So heartbreakingly sad, bringing tears to Sören's own eyes.

Sören reached out and held Dooku closer, tighter. He rained little kisses over Dooku's face as Dooku shook with silent tears in his arms. "I love you, Nico. I love you. I love you. *You are not alone.* We'll get through this."

Dooku's tears became less silent, and Sören found himself crying as well, even though he'd tried not to. Maglor came in the room. Wordlessly, now it was his turn to get into pajamas and climb in the bed with them, holding the reincarnations of his father and uncle, kissing each of them in turn.

"Hey," Maglor said softly. "*Hey.*"

But now Maglor was crying as well, his empathy overwhelmed by both of them

Maglor decided to make a blanket and pillow fort for them. Sören smiled. There was something pure and beautiful about it, in the midst of their sadness - the children of Finwë, and one of the Fëanorions, creating a living shield wall. Safety and warmth, and reinforcing that feeling of being able to take on the world if they put aside whatever differences they had and stood together as one.

And yet, there was a fresh wave of sadness. Here was Sören-Fëanor, Dooku-Fingolfin, Once again, that ache for Finarfin, now as sharp as a limb freshly cut off. Sören's heart cried, and for a moment he could have sworn the two Silmarils hidden away out there somewhere cried out as well. Sören's eyes met Maglor's, and he knew Maglor could feel that note of pain in the Song.

But Sören didn't even know how to begin looking. He'd tried to scry via the *palantir* Maglor owned, months ago, when more of his memories from then had started coming back, and the *palantir* spoke in riddles, showing images to Sören's mind that seemed to have nothing to do with anything, like black swans. It seemed after finding the first Silmaril by accident that Sören could call the Silmarils to himself by putting his intent out into the universe but not forcing an outcome, letting the Silmarils hear that call and come in their time, and Sören wondered if it was the same with Finarfin.

In the meantime, that missing limb from their family tree *hurt*, now more than ever.

And in the meantime, with nothing he could do about the missing one, Sören turned his focus back to the family he did have, curled up with their cats and dog, given shelter within the pillow and blanket fort. For at least a little while, a Finwion cuddle pile seemed like it could cure all manner of ills.

But there was still nonetheless that undercurrent of fear, what was potentially around the

corner.

Tears unnumbered ye shall shed. There had already been so many tears, and here they were sailing down that river to yet more grief.

Chapter 4

For the rest of the month of September, Sören and Maglor had their classes at Logifugl Listaskóli as usual, if nothing had happened. Sören felt guilty about the classes he'd cancelled to attend to the "family emergency", and he was hoping that getting back to his normal routine, providing a space for the artistically-inclined of Akureyri to try their hand at different mediums for an affordable price, would snap him out of the funk that had fallen on him. Usually, being around so many people creating - and taking joy in the act of creation, having fun with it - was deeply nourishing to him, at times downright intoxicating, the richest of food and wine to offer to the Flame Imperishable. But the days dragged on, and Sören found himself wanting the day to be over hours before his day was actually over.

His students seemed to understand something was very wrong, the classes more quiet than usual, less enthusiasm, as if the storm cloud hanging over Sören's head now was affecting everyone else.

Sören had a headache on the morning of Thursday, October first. This in and of itself was somewhat disturbing - ever since taking Ingwion's blood, Sören no longer had asthma, and he no longer experienced human ailments like cold or flu. He knew from experience with hangover that there were limits to pushing his body, but he tended to not get headaches on their own anymore. He made himself go to classes anyway, and by the time afternoon break rolled around and he and Maglor had lunch together, Sören's headache was gone. But as it rained outside, Sören thought of sitting at the Dimmuborgir after Qui-Gon's wake, in the rain, and he desperately wanted to be anywhere but there. Even though he hadn't known Qui-Gon well, he was still family, and in addition to feeling Dooku's grief across their Force bond, it was starting to hit Sören that he would eventually lose other family members, ones that he was close to...

...and he had already lost both his parents. He had lost loves too – the years of loneliness without Maglor. The way he missed Ingwion, still.

That sense of foreboding he'd had just before Qui-Gon's death was still there, as if Qui-Gon's death was a harbinger of worse things to come. He didn't think it was just his PTSD talking, because Dooku and Maglor were worried, too... and there had been that warning from Galadriel.

He tried to pull himself together in the bathroom, taking deep breaths, splashing cold water on his face, running cold water over his hands. He tried to put on a brave face for his afternoon class, "fake it till you make it" false cheer.

And then, as he heard Maglor's piano across the hall, Maglor playing "Moonlight Sonata" for his students, Sören began to cry. He tried to contain it, but silent tears gave way to loud, messy ones, falling apart in front of his students, who just watched in horror.

Maglor played "Moonlight Sonata" for the full nearly ten minutes, as Sören sobbed and couldn't even make words to answer his students' inquiries as to whether or not they were OK, and when the song was done, Maglor closed the door to his classroom for a minute - Sören could hear his voice, but it was muffled and he couldn't make out words, it only sounded like it was important. Then a few minutes later he opened the door to his classroom, his students began to leave, and he strode across the hall into Sören's classroom and told everyone, "All right, class is dismissed for the day. If anyone wants a partial refund for their time please e-mail me and I'll set everything up." He put a hand on Sören's shoulder, and Sören gave him a look, not wanting to be coddled - until he started

sobbing again, and Maglor just pulled Sören against him, petting and rocking him as the students began to file out.

When it was just them in the classroom Sören glared again, through his tears. "You didn't have to do that."

"Yes, I did." Maglor folded his arms.

Sören pinched the bridge of his nose. "You shouldn't have done that. That wasn't professional."

"Neither was having a breakdown in front of your students." Then, before Sören could protest, Maglor pet Sören's curls, stroked his face, looking into his eyes, and he said, "Look, I'm sorry to say that - I'm sorry to go there. For what it's worth, I don't think any less of you for crying like this, and the chances are good most of your students don't either. But you were - are - too much of a wreck to finish the class today. I'm not going to apologize for sending your students home, and we're going home now, and you're going to take tomorrow off, too."

"But -"

"No buts." Maglor glared. "It isn't like we can't afford the refund, with Ingwion having set us up like he did."

"It's not the money I'm worried about. I don't want to be flaky and disappoint everyone -"

"Say it's a 'family emergency', which isn't entirely a lie – the aftermath of Qui-Gon's death has been affecting you. These things happen, shit happens, it can't be helped, and people need to be able to accept that. I know you don't like letting people down, Ada." Maglor pulled Sören into another fierce, tight hug. "I know that you want to do right by others. But right now, you have to take care of yourself. You can't help anyone else if you're falling apart. You need some time to just... decompress from everything."

Sören started sobbing again. He hated that Maglor was right. And after a few minutes of ugly, messy crying, he confessed the heart of the matter: "I feel so weak. Like I should be stronger." A few shuddery gasps. "You know, I've tried so hard to not internalize that toxic masculinity crap, but Einar drilled it into my head so much..."

"I know, Ada." Maglor pet Sören's curls, skritched his beard, rubbed his back. "You're not weak. You have a heart, and right now it is in pain for the ones you love. Einar didn't understand that because he had no heart. Had no soul." Maglor gave a derisive snort. "Orc."

Maglor held Sören a few minutes longer, and then he pulled back and jangled the keys to the jeep. "We should get going."

"I insist on putting things away first. I know you'll say it can wait, but it'll nag at me till it gets done. And I need to water the plants."

"OK." Maglor nodded. "I'll help."

They spent the next while putting away Sören's art supplies, and watering the plants that Sören kept around the building, and that seemed to ground Sören enough to make him stop crying, though he was still shaken. When Sören turned off the lights, switched the sign on the door to say *lokað* instead of *opið*, and locked the door, it felt like such an act of

defeat that it set him off crying again.

Dooku wasn't there when they got home - he left a note saying he went grocery shopping, which wasn't unusual for him at this time of day. Maglor pulled Sören onto the couch with him for cuddles and they were promptly joined by Snúður, Rasputin, Pumpkin and Huan. When Dooku came back from the store that was how he found them, and gave a fond smile as he used the Force to bring the bags in that he didn't have enough hands to carry.

"Precious," Dooku said.

Sören desperately grasped at levity. "My precious, yessss..."

Maglor gave him a little swat. "Do you want some help putting things away, Nicolae?"

"I've got this," Dooku said, "but some help making dinner would be good." He gave Sören a pointed look. "I sensed in the Force you were rather upset -"

Sören facepalmed. It was one thing for his students to see him cry and go from having a happy time creating to being worried and a little upset themselves, it was another thing for Dooku - who'd been through a lot the past several days himself - to *feel* the empathic blowback. "Of course. I'm sorry -"

"No need to apologize. Anyway, we're having *paella* tonight, since I know that's one of your favorite things."

Sören managed a weak smile at that. Maglor skritched Sören's beard and kissed his brow. "I'd be happy to help," Maglor said. "*As you know*, I loved making *paella* for Sören years ago..."

Remembering the nearly-five years they'd lived together in Reykjavik, when Maglor was posing as a Brazilian named Alejandro Magalhães - an identity he still maintained to the outside world - gave Sören a feeling of nostalgia. As complicated as "Alejandro" had been, as many secrets as he'd been keeping, things were also simpler then, before Sören had ever gotten caught up in the mystery of who Maglor was, and who and what Sören had once been, and finding out he was not only cursed by the Valar, but the Aesir had it in for him as well.

As Maglor got up to help Dooku in the kitchen, that flood of memories hit him now, when Sören and "Alejandro" had simply created a little nest for themselves in a penthouse flat in Reykjavik, spending most of their time creating together or making love, one fueling the other, and it had been beautiful. They had traveled together, their last vacation being to Rio de Janeiro itself, when Sören thought it was "Alejandro"'s home - and Maglor had said, years later, that in a way he wasn't lying, it was the home of his heart, a great lover of Brazilian culture, music and food, the beauty and sensuality of the Brazilian people. Sören loved Maglor, the Elf, but he still loved "Alejandro", the first great love of his life - his first great heartbreak. Since Maglor had revealed himself, and since many other things had been revealed in its wake, Maglor had only "put it on" outside the privacy of family-only spaces, and Sören didn't want Maglor to put on an act if he wasn't comfortable with that. Yet, Sören missed those days when Maglor called him *meu coração* and other endearments, when Maglor played songs by João Gilberto on his acoustic guitar and sang in Portuguese and, when not playing old-school goth music like The Cure and Depeche Mode and Cocteau Twins, would put on bossa nova and dance with him around their flat.

Sören felt the tears brimming again, and he attempted to distract himself by taking out his father's journal. That turned out to be exactly the worst thing to do right now - reading

about his father's final months, recording dreams and visions where he was being threatened and attacked by Odin, waking-day disturbances with accidents that he just barely missed - was harrowing. He could only get a few pages in before he had to close the journal and buried his face in his hands, screaming internally at the horror his father had experienced, and he knew it was going to get so much worse as he read through to the end, to those last days before the coroner said he had "a stroke", a healthy man all of twenty-nine years old when he died.

Sören picked at his dinner, even though he'd been looking forward to it. Dooku finally pulled Sören onto his lap and put a forkful in his mouth. "Here, Daddy will feed you," Dooku said. That seemed to help, and Sören was able to finish his food with Dooku feeding him, even playing "airplane" for a few bites. And after dinner, Sören continued snuggling Dooku on his lap, held safe in his strong arms, the closest thing to a father he'd known in this life.

When Maglor was done with the dishes - usually Sören did it when others cooked, but Maglor insisted Sören take a break tonight - Maglor stood in the doorframe between the kitchen and living room and asked, "Sören, have you made the announcement yet on the website that the studio will be closed tomorrow?"

Sören made noises.

Maglor put a hand on his hip. "I could do it if you want -"

"No, I..." Sören scowled. "I need to... be responsible." He let out a deep sigh and used the Force to pull over his laptop. Dooku's arms tightened around him as Sören typed up the announcement that due to "family emergency", there would be no classes tomorrow. Once he posted it to the announcements page on the website, he also copypasted it into a e-mail sent to his students.

"Sweetheart," Dooku said, kissing Sören's cheek, "you did the right thing. Macalaurë told me how upset you were. I could feel it, of course, but..."

"I hate this," Sören said.

"We all hate this," Dooku said. "As you know, this is affecting all of us. But we do what we have to do to get through it." He patted Sören's head, and tousled his curls. "Speaking of which, I think I shall head to the gym for a couple hours and work off some of my own... feeling out of sorts."

"*Desafinado*," Maglor said, as Sören climbed off Dooku's lap.

"Despacito?" Sören couldn't resist trolling, his default coping mechanism.

"*Desafinado*," Maglor insisted, giving Sören a look. "Out of tune... off key."

"Yes." Dooku nodded. "That sums it up rather well. None of us have been 'right' since we felt that disturbance in the Force, which is still there... it wasn't just Qui-Gon's death." Dooku frowned and looked out the window, not at anything in particular, but as if he were looking far away. Across their bond Sören could see Dooku's memories of Qui, their friendship, and Fingolfin's memories of his children, his pain at losing them, wondering where they were and if he'd ever see them again. Sören ached for him.

"Are you sure you want to go the gym?" Sören raised an eyebrow. "We could watch a chick flick, eat ice cream, cry..."

"I need to feel like I'm doing something productive instead of being... trapped in limbo," Dooku said. "And frankly, so do you." Dooku narrowed his eyes at Sören. "I agree with Macalaurë that you should take tomorrow off. But I also know that's a blow to your pride. So you should find something to do."

Dooku got changed for the gym, and after giving Maglor and Sören both a hug and a kiss, he was off. Huan whined after Dooku left, as if he sensed how much distress Dooku was in - he was right - and then Maglor, feeling sympathetic, gave Huan a dog treat. "That's a good boy," he said, petting the dog as he scarfed up the treat.

After lapping up water, Huan started whining again, this time for a different reason. Sören and Maglor both recognized "the potty dance". "You want to come with me to take him for a walk?" Maglor asked.

Sören nodded. "Might as well."

It was drizzling instead of raining now. Maglor wore a leather jacket over his black sweater and black jeans, and Sören was fine in a hooded sweatshirt over his flannel shirt and the T-shirt underneath, hands in the pockets of his jeans as Maglor took him by the arm. It was a short walk from their house to downtown Akureyri and they went into town, which was quiet on a night like this. There was something melancholy yet peaceful about walking in the night, in the damp, with shops and restaraunts lit up, the occasional car driving by, Huan waggling his tail and lolling his tongue like he had not a care in the world, was happy to be out - *at least somebody is happy right now*, Sören thought, looking up at the night sky.

"Remember when we used to go for walks in Reykjavik?" Maglor asked.

"I do." Sören nodded.

"Akureyri is such a different flavor. Smaller, obviously, less busy. But tonight it almost feels like back then, walking after we had *paella*, getting some fresh air, just being together." Maglor leaned in to steal a kiss.

"I miss it sometimes." Sören was finally admitting it aloud. "Not that I want to turn back time and undo all of... this. What we know now compared to what we knew then. What we are now, what we have now. But I miss certain things about it." Sören's lips quirked. "When you said *desafinado*, back home..."

"Ah." Maglor's arm unhooked from Sören's arm and went around his waist now, giving him a little squeeze. "To be honest, I miss it too, but I thought that it might be... a sore spot for you. A reminder of when I was lying. Of when I left. I worried you'd think I was being 'fake', pretending to be something I'm not..."

Sören paused in his tracks for a moment, gave Maglor a look, and then shook his head and started walking again. His left hand came out of his pocket and now his arm was around Maglor's waist too. "I want you to be yourself... I want you to be comfortable. But you told me yourself over a year ago that when you, you know, played the part of a Brazilian, that was authentic to your *heart*. I understand if you don't want to 'put on the performance' at home when you still have to do it out here." Sören looked around to make sure there were no passerby who could hear them, but it looked like it was all clear. "But if you do, and you've been holding back because you're worried I'll judge you... well, it's not that dissimilar to how I was Fëanor and now I'm Sören. You are the sum of your experiences, both the present and the past. If you visited Brazil and fell in love with it and

it became a part of you, I'm OK with you recognizing that and expressing it, somehow. It won't feel fake to me."

Maglor stopped walking and he took Sören into his arms, held him tight. "Thank you for understanding, *meu fogo*."

Sören's breath hitched at the old endearment. He took Maglor's face in his hands and kissed him passionately.

Maglor kissed him back, hard enough to take Sören's breath away - hard enough for Sören's cock to rise in his jeans. Huan whined as if to say "let's keep walking," and Maglor chuckled and they resumed walking. But, stealing glances at each other, both flushed and breathing hard, they soon started back for home.

"You think we could have a night where I paint, you play?" Sören took Maglor's hand. "Nico thinks I should do something productive, and that feels productive, and like... like old times. A continuation of what we had, back in Reykjavik, something comforting and familiar."

"I'd like that," Maglor said, nodding.

When they got back home, Sören set up his easel, a fresh canvas and paints. Maglor took out his acoustic guitar, instead of playing on the war harp.

Tonight, Maglor was playing a combination of old songs of his - Sören recognized "By the Sea" and "Saudade", from when they'd first met - and improvisations, some instrumental, some where he sang in Elvish. And as he played, Sören found himself painting the next part of a series, a series he didn't think he'd be continuing.

There was a set of three paintings Sören had made, that Sören entitled*Triptych*. The first two were the last paintings he'd done, in the weeks and months prior to "Alejandro"'s departure in 2014, before the long dry spell where Sören couldn't make art at all. They were both set at Reynisfjara, the black sand beach.

In the first one Maglor was depicted as a merman - this had been years before Sören knew he was an Elf, but painting as he did from his mind's eye, Sören thought in hindsight that subconsciously, he probably knew Maglor wasn't human. Maglor-the-merman's tail glimmered in a silver light shining through dark storm clouds, and he wore a silver crown and was strewn with pearls in his hair and necklaces, playing a harp on the beach. Sören hadn't known Maglor could play the harp back then, either. There was a storm in the sky, and Sören had painted himself on the beach, laying in wreckage from a ship, tangled in seaweed, waking to the sound of the harp, love in his eyes.

In the second painting, the storm had passed and given way to a rainbow. Maglor lay on his back in the sand - he now had human legs, that were covered in drops of Sören's cum. Sören was riding him, Maglor buried in him to the hilt, his cock dripping precum onto Maglor's body. Sören was wearing one of the pearl necklaces that Maglor had been wearing, and there was a leash of pearls attached, wrapped around Maglor's hand.

The third painting had been done in summer 2019 - five years after the Reynisfjara was in storms once again, an even fiercer storm than the first portrait. From the waves rose an eldritch kraken, and on the beach lay a bloody human heart, a trail of blood leading into the sea, which glowed with a strange light.

Now Sören was painting Reynisfjara again. On his thirty-fifth birthday in November 2019,

Sören had found the first Silmaril at Reynisfjara, and Maglor had been there with him. They made love on the beach to celebrate. Sören did not paint them making love on the beach, nor did he try to recreate the finding of the Silmaril. But in this painting they were at the beach with an aurora making fire in the sky, as the fire began to burn between them, with Maglor putting Sören on a leash, a tangible symbol of ownership.

The painting wouldn't be finished tonight, but it was well on its way there, Sören frantic, feverish. Maglor's set was winding down with cover songs.

Whenever I'm alone with you
You make me feel like I am home again
Whenever I'm alone with you
You make me feel like I am whole again

Whenever I'm alone with you
You make me feel like I am young again
Whenever I'm alone with you
You make me feel like I am fun again

However far away
I will always love you
However long I stay
I will always love you
Whatever words I say
I will always love you
I will always love you

Whenever I'm alone with you
You make me feel like I am free again
Whenever I'm alone with you
You make me feel like I am clean again

However far away
I will always love you
However long I stay
I will always love you
Whatever words I say
I will always love you
I will always love you

Sören's eyes burned with tears, and his heart burned even more.

Sören had to stop painting. He tried to hold back the tears, but the dam erupted. Maglor put down his guitar, and he drew Sören into his arms, held him tight, rocked him, made soothing noises. Maglor rained fierce kisses over Sören's face, and then grabbed Sören's face in his hands and kissed him passionately. They were both crying now, and they rocked together, weeping, overcome by emotion that defied classification, too many emotions coming together and colliding, consuming them.

"I feel too much," Sören cried. "It hurts so much."

And Maglor knew he couldn't take away the pain completely. But Sören saw him trying to do something, anything, to reach out and give Sören some relief, somehow. Maglor picked up his guitar again and to Sören's surprise and delight, he began to play the same song he'd used to declare his feelings to Sören in 2009, what felt like ages ago now.

Tall and dark and young and lovely, the boy from Akureyri goes walking
And when he passes, each one he passes goes - ah
When he walks, he's like a samba that swings so cool and sways so gentle
That when he passes, each one he passes goes - ah
But I watch him so sadly, how can I tell him I love him
Yes I would give my heart gladly,
But each day, when he walks to the sea
He looks straight ahead, not at me
Tall, and dark and young and lovely, the boy from Akureyri goes walking
And when he passes, I smile - but he doesn't see (doesn't see)
(He just doesn't see, he never sees me...)

Maglor put his guitar down, picked up Sören, and carried him over to the futon in the corner of the studio room. Maglor quickly undressed, and Sören did too, their clothes in a haphazard heap on the floor. Maglor climbed over Sören then, lay him back on the futon, and grabbed Sören's wrists with his hands, pinning him down to kiss him again and again, hard cocks rubbing together.

"*Eu te amo, espírito de fogo.*" Maglor kissed Sören's neck, licked, nibbled. "*Meu incêndio, ninguém pode domar, ninguém pode apagar. Você queima tão brilhantemente. Você é a luz do mundo. E eu preciso de você agora mais do que nunca, exatamente como você é, do jeito que você manteve o fogo queimando na escuridão. Humano ou elfo, é a sua luz que eu amo.*"

And though Sören had no idea what he was saying, his heart somehow*knew*, just the same. He stroked Maglor's face, pet his hair. "Take me to a better place for awhile," Sören whispered. "Take me into the Song."

Maglor kissed Sören again, fiercely, his hands grabbing Sören's wrists once more. Their cocks rubbed and rubbed, kissing with such passion and sensuality that Sören felt close to coming already just like this. When Maglor kissed down Sören's throat to kiss his nipples, to lick and suckle them, Sören cried out and bucked against him, cock throbbing, precum flowing.

"Please..." Sören let out a little whimper and shivered.

Sören heard himself cry out over and over as Maglor teased his pierced nipples, knowing just what Sören liked, knowing he'd gotten his nipples pierced for this reason. His silver eyes were molten mercury as he tugged a nipple ring with his teeth before lashing the aching peak with his tongue, nibbling, sucking hard, then his tongue brushing slow and feather-light. "Beautiful," Maglor husked. "All of you is beautiful, *meu lindo fogo.*"

He kept Sören on that edge, cock rubbing cock as he went back and forth between Sören's exquisitely sensitized, hard nipples, then kissed and licked and nibbled his way up Sören's collarbone, shoulder, throat, to claim his mouth. They kissed, and their tongues licked together betwen kisses, teasing, playing, before Maglor kissed back down Sören's jaw and throat and shoulder and collarbone, to feast on his nipples some more. And the silken steel of Maglor's cock felt so good against his, their sensitive frenulums brushing, Sören feeling Maglor's cock throbbing against his, as his own pulsed and twinged, stiffening almost painfully, balls tight and ready to explode.

At last Maglor let go of Sören's wrists and Sören touched everywhere he could reach, hands sliding over the sleek, hard Noldorin warrior's body. He played with the flood of

Maglor's hair, enjoying the silky texture, the way it shone blue-black in the light. Maglor's fingers walked over Sören's body, lingering on the nipples to brush and pluck, making Sören crazy, crying out into their kiss. And then Maglor played with Sören's curls, rubbing his scalp, and Sören's arms wrapped around him, and they kissed like they were breathing each other's souls, needed each desperate, hungry kiss to stay alive. They ground against each other harder, faster, cock teasing cock, until Sören could take no more and his orgasm erupted. With a wild cry, he watched as his cock splashed its seed over Maglor's, and a few seconds later Maglor's cock splashed over his own cock. The rich cream spurted and flowed, a most erotic sight, even more erotic when Maglor scooped up their combined essence with his fingers and fed Sören, and Sören fed Maglor from his own fingers. They kissed, sharing their taste between them, the divine sweetness of Flame and Song. It felt like they had just done something sacred, something magical, and Sören could feel the energy winding between them and around them, like thunder and lightning and fire and wind and then freedom, soaring, clouds and light.

They needed more. A few kisses later, they hardened up again, and settled between each other's legs, sucking each other. Maglor's cock in his mouth soothed and aroused Sören all at once, and Maglor's mouth on him was to die for, Sören moaning around the cock in his mouth, gently thrusting into Maglor's mouth as Maglor rubbed his tongue while he sucked.

They drank each other greedily, licked each other clean, and went back for seconds, sucking harder than before, devouring. Maglor teased Sören by licking his cock all over, licking Sören's balls, tongue lashing the sensitive place where balls and ass met, before his tongue speared inside him. Sören followed suit, pushing his tongue into Maglor's opening, working his tongue like a hurricane. Back and forth they went between sucking each other's cocks and licking inside each other, trembling together, moaning and gasping. And when they flooded each other's mouths again, it was so, so good.

It still wasn't enough. They were in that space now where they were completely lost in each other, that need to possess each other and be possessed, consume, *burn* together. The grief and worries melted away for now as Maglor lay on his back and Sören sank into him, as Maglor grabbed Sören's hips and rasped, "Give me all you've got," and Sören let the beast in him take over, pounding into Maglor without mercy, and Maglor rocked his hips right back at Sören, until Sören wondered who was fucking who. Sören took Maglor's cock in his hand, stroking it in time with his furious thrusts, rattling it. Sören's free hand caressed Maglor's body, needing to touch him, feel him. And Sören quivered to Maglor's hands sliding over him, reverent, worshipful.

Maglor spent over Sören's chest and stomach, crying out, "Sören, Fëanáro, *adar*, *meu querido*!" Sören was deeply, deeply gratified, growling "Kanafinwë" as he took three last violent thrusts and came into him.

And yet they still hungered for more. Sören pulled out of Maglor, still straddling his hips, and now he impaled himself on Maglor's cock, both of them crying out as Maglor buried himself to the hilt. Sören bounced wildly, panting, gasping, almost sobbing as he worked his hips and ass and Maglor thrust into him, balls slapping against him, hitting that sweet spot deep inside Sören again and again. "Fuck, oh god, that's so good," Sören wailed, nails digging into Maglor's flesh. "Fuck me, fuck me, *fuck me*..."

"Need you," Maglor growled. "Need you so much..."

Their eyes met, and Sören leaned down for a kiss. They slowed down together, Maglor's arms around Sören. The pleasure and tension built to fever pitch, ever higher and deeper, as time seemed to stop with each slow, sensuous thrust. They were lost together,

reaching back to those times in Reykjavik when love was new and they nested... further back to when Maglor was a young man and explored his sexuality with Fëanor... and reaching into the future, as uncertain as it was. *Give me you, and I will survive anything. We will find light in the darkness. Our fire will forge the Song out of the silence.*

Sören rode even harder than before, Maglor making a deep, feral, primal, guttural noise as he held onto Sören tight and slammed into him, Sören bucking like he was on a wild bull. And they came together, screaming. Sören aimed so his seed sprayed all over Maglor's body, his face and his hair, like the strands of pearls in the painting from years ago. *Claim you*, Sören thought in the back of his mind before he couldn't think anymore, only feel that surging, melting pleasure.

Sören licked the mess from Maglor's skin, and when he lapped up Maglor's face, Maglor laughed before he licked at Sören's tongue, and then they were kissing again, rubbing their tongues together between kisses, and still they wanted more. Sören got on all fours, face down ass up, and Maglor took him from behind, pulling Sören's curls, fucking him savagely, growling - which Sören found so delicious. It was this orgasm that finally slaked their hunger, for now, Sören coming so hard he shrieked, the entire world seeming to fall away in white light, white heat. And then it was just floating bliss, as peaceful as it had been wild. Maglor made a noise of contentment as he lay with his chest on Sören's back, nuzzling Sören's curls.

"I love you," Maglor whispered.

"I love you."

Sören passed out like that. At some point he was aware of Maglor carrying him to bed and he settled between Maglor and Dooku. He slept soundly, instead of the fitful sleep he'd had all week.

_

The alarm went off on Friday morning at Sören's usual wake-up time - he hadn't been the one to set it - and he gave it a murderous glare as he slammed it off. Then he gave a murderous glare to Maglor who walked in and said, "Good morning, *meu querido. "*

"I thought you told me to take today off," Sören grumbled.

"I did. But I thought it might be nice to go somewhere, and we have a limited amount of daylight for that."

Sören showered and dressed, and when he saw Dooku out in the living room, he asked, "Are you coming with us?"

"I am not," Dooku said. "I am writing. The two of you enjoy yourselves, though."

Sören gave Dooku a look on the way out. He suspected Dooku was isolating himself after Qui's death - it was one thing to need space to process grief, it was another thing to shut down and shut others out, and Sören had a fair amount of experience with doing that himself, both in this life and when he was Fëanor.

Maglor noticed as he drove in the direction of the airport. "Don't worry too much about him," Maglor said. "We'll give him some time, and then we'll drag him along to do

something tomorrow."

It wasn't raining, nor was it sunny - it was cool and overcast. The weather predicted sunshine tomorrow, but it was today that they were going to Reynisfjara, which Sören figured out once they'd flown into Reykjavik, Maglor got a rental car in the city, and proceeded to drive out of the city. The car felt a little too warm for some reason, and Sören would have just chalked it up to being a different car than what they were used to, but he knew it wasn't that.

Maglor had brought music for the ride and on the way down the car stereo played appropriately somber, atmospheric goth songs - Sören recognized Black Tape For A Blue Girl, This Ascension, Love Spirals Downwards. As "Illusory Me" by Love Spirals Downwards played, Sören looked at the dark clouds in the sky and thought of Ingwion. Sören closed his eyes. The thought that he might never see Ingwion again fell upon him hard.

"Sören," Maglor said, knowing what he was thinking, "he's a part of you now. His blood gave you eternal life. And the best way to connect with him... is to do what we're about to do."

Suddenly Sören understood why the car felt so warm. "You brought the Silmaril, didn't you?"

Maglor nodded.

"I could... feel it. I didn't know quite what I was feeling..."

"We've got to work on that." Maglor narrowed his eyes. "Those are yours by right." He sighed. "I suspect you would have known what you were feeling if you didn't have that..." He made a vague hand gesture. "Grief hanging over you. That sadness. You're always a touch melancholy, with what your life has been like, but this week has been..."

"A week." Sören nodded. "Makes sense."

There was no one at the beach on a gloomy October day like today. Maglor took his acoustic guitar out of the backseat, and Sören carried the pouch with the Silmaril. They built a bonfire together, and Maglor began to play on the guitar.

At first the music was melancholy, like what had been playing on the drive down. And then the music was brighter - bossa novas, Maglor singing in Portuguese. Sören made a makeshift torch with a big piece of driftwood and found himself beginning to dance in circles around Maglor and the fire, and then out to shore and back, letting himself be one with Maglor's music, and one with the memories of happier times living together in Reykjavik... the promise of happier times to come.

The sun began to set, and just as it had in the painting, dark storm clouds gathered in the red sky, fierce and ominous. Yet Maglor's music was joyous, celebratory. And at last Maglor put down his guitar, picked up a piece of driftwood, lit his own torch, and joined Sören. Maglor threw the driftwood torch into the sea, as if he were offering fire to the sea for the sea giving up the first Silmaril almost a year ago. And then Sören did the same... and then the Silmaril they had rose from the pouch, one over each of their hands, as in the painting, like shining a brilliant lamp over them. Sören and Maglor looked into each other's eyes - Sören felt himself break out into gooseflesh, chills down his spine - and it seemed for a moment like he could hear, in the distance, the song of sirens... the choir of a thousand voices. A breeze stirred, and Sören watched the light of the Silmaril light up

the wind, dancing around them.

Maglor spoke, and now his voice was like a thousand voices. "**Whatever happens, you and I will have each other. We will be all right. What the Force has brought back together, let no one put asunder. Let the Flame and Song be felt once more, to heal this world.**"

They kissed, and that kiss was like pure fire. They fell on each other, as hungry as they were last night. They drank each other, took turns inside each other - Sören on all fours in the sand, Sören riding Maglor, Maglor laying on his back as Sören took him, then at last Maglor riding Sören. They came to climax again and again, cries echoing over the waves. And finally, spent, they held each other by the bonfire, the Silmaril in Sören's hand, Maglor's hand over Sören's, on his heart. Sunset had become dusk and now the first dark of evening, looking up at the first stars in the sky. Sören felt a sense of wonder, like he was seeing the world for the first time. Like something in him had changed, had been reborn or renewed, somehow.

"We should go back," Maglor said.

Sören nodded.

As they put their clothes back on, and put out the bonfire, the wonder Sören felt faded, and was replaced by trepidation. He paused to take one last look out at the sea and the stars, and couldn't shake the feeling that this was the last time he'd ever see Reynisfjara - or at least not for a very long time, long enough that to Sören's was-mortal-just-over-a-year-ago way of thinking, was long enough that it would feel like "never again". He tried to brush that feeling off as just being worried about his family, as the product of having attended a funeral earlier this week... but it lingered, a new miasma to replace the old.

Maglor seemed to sense it when they got in the car, making a face. He turned off the haunting, sad goth music when they got on the road. "Enough of that," he said, and put in his hair metal playlist, giving Sören a cheesy grin.

As they started down the highway back towards Reykjavik, the first song that came up on random felt disturbingly relevant for everything that was happening.

I follow the Moskva
Down to Gorky Park
Listening to the wind of change
An August summer night
Soldiers passing by
Listening to the wind of change

Sören lit a lighter, making Maglor laugh.

The world is closing in
Did you ever think
That we could be so close, like brothers
The future's in the air
I can feel it everywhere
Blowing with the wind of change

Take me to the magic of the moment
On a glory night
Where the children of tomorrow dream away

in the wind of change

Maglor got a little choked up when the song was done - Sören knew it would always remind him of his time in West Berlin, watching the Wall come down.

And then, as if the Force itself said they needed a lift, drums thumped and there was a familiar guitar riff. Sören turned it up and sang along:

Backstroke lover
Always hidin' 'neath the covers
'Til I talked to your daddy, he say

He said, "You ain't seen nothin'
'Til you're down on a muffin
Then you're sure to be a-changin' your ways"

I met a cheerleader
Was a real young bleeder
Oh, the times I could reminisce

'Cause the best things of lovin'
With her sister and her cousin
Only started with a little kiss
Like this

Sören played air guitar. "Feels like it's missing something," Sören said. "Dunno what, though."

Maglor shrugged.

Seesaw swingin' with the boys in the school
And your feet flyin' up in the air
Singin', "Hey diddle diddle"
With your kitty in the middle
Of the swing like you didn't care

So I took a big chance
At the high school dance
With a missy who was ready to play
Wasn't me she was foolin'
'Cause she knew what she was doin'
And I knew love was here to stay
When she told me to

"Walk this way, talk this way"
"Walk this way, walk this way"
"Walk this way, walk this way"
"Walk this way, talk this way"
Just gimme a kiss
Like this

Now Sören was playing air guitar on a Silmaril, which was a bit small for it and looked ridiculous. Maglor facepalmed and shook his head. "Dammit, Sören..."

"That's the tiny guitar I'm playing for Morgoth," Sören said, "since we don't have a tiny violin."

Maglor snorted and howled. "OK, Ada."

But Sören knew, then, that Morgoth was going to put up one hell of a fight when the time came to face him – and first they would have to face Odin, and the Valar - and that was part of why he was worried. The trip had been a balm, but things weren't resolved yet. Not by a long shot.

Chapter 5

Sören was not a morning person, and nonetheless he found himself waking up just before dawn on the morning of Saturday, October third. He headed into the studio room and put the final details on the painting of himself and Maglor at Reynisfjara. It seemed odd to him that this painting went with the other three and yet this one was a sort of snapshot, something literal, while the other three had been symbolic, and then Sören thought to himself, *We had to get through the layers of metaphor and symbolism to find the truth. Like all mythologies.*

That thought gave him a frisson, and it also led him out to the living room to take up his father's journal once more. And like his previous attempt at reading it, he once again didn't get very far before he had that sick, sad feeling again, seeing with his mind's eye his father's fear and courage as Odin was threatening him, his wife, his children - the nightmares, the visions, the freak "accidents" that he barely missed, that were too many coincidences to be a coincidence.

Sören went back to bed, but he couldn't sleep, feeling too awake, and now also, too disturbed. Dooku rolled against him, arms tight around him. Sören started raining kisses over Dooku's face, making him smile, and then Sören smiled when he felt the tent in Dooku's pajama bottoms. Since Qui's death Dooku had been avoiding sex, and Sören had been willing to give him some space, but he missed his husband and ached to comfort him. Now, as Sören palmed the bulge in Dooku's pajama bottoms and Dooku stretched against him and made an "mmmmm", petting Sören's curls, Sören hungered.

He claimed Dooku's mouth. "I love you, you know," Sören husked.

"I know," Dooku said. His eyes opened, sad but warm. "I love you too."

They kissed again. "I want to make love to you," Sören whispered. "I want to make you feel better." Sören reached for Dooku's cock down his pajama bottoms, his own cock twinging as Dooku's cock leapt in his hand. "Can I offer you a blowjob?"

"May I."

Sören's eyes narrowed.

Dooku's eyes crinkled at the corners, his lips quirked into a tiny smile. "Well? What are you waiting for?"

They kissed again - Sören gave him a playful swat for the unnecessary grammar lesson - and then Sören dove down, pulling down Dooku's pajama bottoms just enough to get his cock out. Sören nuzzled the luxurious silver bush framing it, breathing in the clean musk of him, and then took a few teasing licks, making Dooku groan, his cock hardening further. At last Sören took the cock into his mouth, swallowing down the first third, his hand rubbing the rest of the shaft. He bobbed his head up and down, kissing Dooku's cock - sucking, tongue rubbing, playing - and Dooku moaned, petting Sören's curls, then grabbing them as Sören sucked harder, rubbed his tongue harder, the cock gliding in and out of his mouth faster. Sören got more of it down and Dooku let out a soft cry, then a deep groan as Sören cupped and rubbed the balls, making a slurping sound as he sucked away.

Maglor's eyes were open now and he watched them, idly stroking himself, then less idly when he saw Dooku noticing. Sören moaned around the cock in his mouth as Dooku and

Maglor shared a kiss and then there was heat in their eyes as Dooku watched Maglor stroke himself with interest, and Maglor watched Sören sucking Dooku. Now Maglor was petting Sören as well, and gently rubbing his back. Sören sucked harder, the slurping noise louder, and so were Dooku's moans.

When Dooku and Maglor started kissing again, Sören took Dooku's cock out of his mouth and licked it - chased the precum flowing down the shaft, traced the throbbing veins with his tongue. He paid loving attention to the head, lashing the slit and then swirling around and around the head in circles. His tongue slid down to the sensitive, prominent frenulum, licking fast the slow. Dooku moaned, and once again pulled apart from Maglor to watch Sören teasing him. Sören's lips wrapped around the head, sucking just the head for a moment, then let the cock slip to lick it some more.

Sören carried on like that almost to the finish - hand rubbing the base of the shaft, sucking the head of the cock, licking it, making Dooku crazier and crazier, moaning, trembling. Maglor stroked himself harder, watching. And then, feeling mischievous, he sucked more of the length of Dooku's cock into his mouth, slowly, and when he felt Dooku tensing, balls tightening, he took the cock out of his mouth again and licked the head. Just before Dooku could come like that, Sören reached for Maglor's cock, and Maglor knew without Sören saying anything what he wanted. Sören fit the heads of both cocks into his mouth and sucked them hard, rubbing his tongue as hard and fast as he could with his mouth so full, making a filthy slurping noise. Maglor and Dooku kissed, quivering together, moaning, and then at last Maglor warned, "*Sören* - " and that was all the warning Sören got before they flooded his mouth at the same time. Sören reached down his own pajama bottoms and brought himself off almost immediately as he swallowed down the delicious taste of his men together, as his body responded to that delicious feeling of being so wanton, so shameless in his lust for them.

"Good morning," Maglor said as the three tangled up together, and Dooku laughed. Sören gave a wicked grin.

Huan bounded onto the bed, and after licking their three faces, Huan began to whine. Maglor rolled his eyes. "He needs to go out," Maglor said.

Maglor and Sören pulled their pants back up and took Huan out in the front yard, in their pajamas, waiting as Huan did his business. When they got back in Dooku was making coffee.

"Do you have plans today?" Sören asked, coming over to hug Dooku and give him a kiss.

"I hadn't thought that far ahead," Dooku said.

"Well..." Sören folded his arms. "You've been isolating yourself a lot since the wake. Which is understandable, but it can't go on forever." He reached out to stroke Dooku's face, then. "I miss you."

Dooku kissed Sören's brow. "I love you."

"So..." Sören glared at him. "You're doing something with us today."

"I think I rather did something with you just now."

"Besides fuck all day, you dirty old man."

Dooku's laughter rang out, and Sören grinned too - he loved making Dooku laugh, especially when he needed it. And it was so good to hear Dooku laugh after the sorrow of this past week.

They had coffee in the living room and Dooku said, more seriously, "I'm afraid I wouldn't be good company. I'm still... processing... everything..."

"Eeyore's friends invite him to things whether he's sad or not," Sören said. "I miss you, you don't have to put on an act and be Mr. Fun Guy for me. But if you really feel self-conscious about it, we could go somewhere, do something out and about."

"Like what?" Dooku raised an eyebrow.

Sören scratched his beard and looked at Maglor, then back at Dooku. "Well... we went to Reynisfjara yesterday. Not that again -" Once again Sören thought of that weird feeling he'd had as he was leaving the beach, that it would be his last time at Reynisfjara or at least not for a very, very long time. "But, you know, maybe a day trip somewhere. Even a weekend trip."

"Do you have any suggestions?"

"Jæja, this is for *you*, so it's more where you want to go, what you want to do."

"Yes, and as I told you, I hadn't made plans, hadn't thought of it, and..." Dooku frowned. "I just don't know."

"OK, well." Sören hated talking like this, but he also needed a bit of levity with everything happening. "Let's act like it's the end of the world. You can do one thing on your 'bucket list for Iceland' that you haven't gotten around to, something you haven't seen yet, someplace we haven't been yet. What is our last hurrah gonna be?"

Dooku took a deep breath. His brow furrowed and his frown intensified - he hated this kind of talk even more than Sören did, but he also appeared to be taking the question seriously, stroking his beard thoughtfully. "All right," he said after a couple minutes. "What's that volcano that erupted in 2010, the one that nobody outside Iceland can pronounce, gave us a bit of trouble in Britain -"

"Eyjafjallajökull."

"Yes. That one. Is it possible to see that?"

Sören nodded. "We have to fly down to Reykjavik and rent a jeep, preferably a superjeep, but we can drive it all the way up."

"Have you ever been?"

Sören shook his head. "No, but a couple at my school went once for a romantic weekend and showed us pictures and stuff, which is how I know. If I remember correctly it's about a three-hour drive out of Reykjavik one way, and there's a lot of stuff in the area that's worth going slowly for, maybe getting out of the jeep and taking a look, so we might as well do a weekend. I'll call María to see if she can watch the animals."

María - one of Sören's students, who had looked after Huan and Snuður before, was actually for once not available to watch them. Sören took a moment to think, and then he called Vigdís and Páll, his old neighbors when he and Dooku were living in Svalbarðseyri, who he and Dooku used to get together with semi-regularly but had only seen intermittently outside of the studio since the move into town, and hadn't hung out with since the summer. Sören felt a little guilty only getting in touch with them now when he needed something, but he resolved to make it up to them.

Vigdís answered her phone after one ring. "Hej, Sören. How goes it?"

She didn't seem angry to hear from him. "Hej, Vigdís. Sorry it's been awhile, and I'm even sorrier to be calling you when I have a favor to ask..."

"It's all right, dear, what do you need?"

"Me and the men are going away for the weekend, can you take my pets till Sunday night? At least Huan, to make sure he gets out?" Huan was the offspring of their dog Auli.

"Oh sure, I can do that!"

"We... we've got three cats now."

Vigdís chuckled. "Are you trying to start a feline army, Sören?"

"Shhhh, that's classified."

Vigdís laughed harder. "But yes, I can do that for you - you can bring them all here, the kids will be happy to have the cats around."

"Great. I'll make it up to you - maybe you and Páll and the kids can come by this week sometime for dinner, or we'll take you guys out to dinner, our treat?"

"You don't have to pay us back, Sören, you used to drive the kids around on short notice and insist on not taking money for it. But we'd like to see you again anyway, so yes, let's get together this week sometime."

That sounded like another thing that would lift the spirits. Sören already felt a little better. "Excellent. OK, well we'll drop them off when we're on our way to the airport and see you in a bit."

As Sören packed an overnight bag, he heard Dooku on the phone, then, making reservations at a hotel in the area.

When they were all packed and ready, they loaded their bags, then Huan and the three cat carriers into the jeep. They drove first to Svalbarðseyri to drop off the animals - and Sören almost fell apart again as they drove past the cabin where he and Dooku lived for awhile, again feeling nostalgia for when life was simple and uncomplicated, when he and Dooku were nesting, cozy, and Sören had felt like he'd finally found some peace in this world. He didn't want to go back to the way things were if it meant leaving Maglor behind, nor did he want to live with the Doom hanging over his head, and the curse of Odin - if nothing else, Odin was going to pay somehow for what he did to Sören's parents - and Sören thought that if there were any more long-lost members of the House of Finwë out there, like Finarfin reborn, he'd rather meet them. It was worth the price of leaving behind the cozy nest - the illusion of peace.

And yet, it hurt so much to remember what he once had, and know that it was gone forever. An ache for the beautiful memories he and Dooku had made in that cabin, starting in November 2017 when Sören had taken him on a trip to Iceland, and Sören had taken Dooku's virginity after Dooku saw the northern lights for the first time.

Sören took some deep breaths, trying to pull himself together. Everything felt so*final*, somehow. He was starting to understand Maglor's songs of *saudade* when they were first in love - not that this compared to the world and family he'd lost. But it was still a loss of a home that could never be gone back to.

On the short plane ride from Akureyri to Reykjavik, Sören tried to distract himself. He reached into the satchel slung over his shoulder, into the pouch where he kept the

Silmaril, pulsing, warm to the touch. His thumb rubbed them for comfort. He thought about what he had long ago, as Fëanor, with Fingolfin, Maglor, and Finarfin. Things could never be the same, but *something* of the past had returned, and he was making a new chapter of their saga, the fusion of past and present into something new... an evolution. He had sacrificed "normal" - whatever that even was - for this life.

I hope it'll be worth it. Eternity doesn't guarantee happiness. It only guarantees, well, eternity. And not even that, if our enemies get more aggressive.

Maglor sensed the inner storm cloud drawing over Sören again and he snapped his fingers. "Hey," Maglor said, giving him a stern look. "We're going to have fun this weekend if it kills us."

"It better not kill us."

"No." Maglor's lips quirked without humor. "It had better not."

—

Maglor drove the superjeep from Reykjavik, on the three-plus hour ride to Eyjafjallajökull. What was supposed to be a three-hour ride did indeed get longer as they took a detour after an hour and forty minutes first to see the legendary Seljalandsfoss waterfall and the nearby Gljúfrabúi waterfall, fed by the meltwater of the Eyjafjallajökull glacier.

They pulled the jeep over, took a walk across the green highlands and made it over, first to the magnificent, powerful Seljalandsfoss, a huge waterfall that made Maglor, Dooku and Sören look absolutely tiny. The power of the giant falls was almost terrifying in its intensity, and yet also intoxicating. Sören loved the wonder in Maglor and Dooku's eyes as they watched the falls - a wonder he himself felt. He'd seen the Goðafoss many times in Akureyri, and it was magnificent, but it definitely wasn't "if you've seen one waterfall you've seen them all", each had a different, distinct character, flavor. This one was big and strong yet also welcoming, sharing of its power. It seemed almost happy to see them, and Sören splashed around in the water, playing like a big kid, giggling, forgetting about his troubles for awhile.

Then they hiked to the ravine where Gljúfrabúi cascaded down the lushly green moss-covered boulders - the falls were partially obscured by the cliff rock, but there was a trail to enter the canyon, and from the gorge they watched the water plummet to a small pool. Being under the shelter of the rock and looking out to the open, watching the bottom of the falls felt magical, a frisson down Sören's spine. Sören's breath was taken away as, in the old-gold light of afternoon, he watched gold-tinged rainbows glimmer. It felt like here, the world was offering them refuge somehow, a solace from everything that had happened as of late... a moment of peace. It was wet here too, enough that Sören was grateful Dooku had admonished to bring waterproof boots and a change of clothing. Yet the spray was not unpleasant, feeling like it was cleansing away some of the miasma that had accumulated since the news of Qui-Gon's death.

Feeling invigorated, smiling, they continued their journey to the glacial volcano of Eyjafjallajökull. In the superjeep they were able to drive all the way up. Sören had never seen a volcano this close before in the entire time he'd lived in Iceland, and though it was "sleeping" - not erupting at the moment - there was nonetheless the strong sense that it was alive, a sort of uneasy thrum around them, a burning energy, further emphasized by

the fire in the sky of sunset, a swath of scarlet cutting into blue. Sören half-wondered if the volcano would go off as they walked closer to the chasm, the thrumming intensifying, the sunset glowing as the red began to swallow the blue, with streaks of orange and fuschia. The Silmaril burned in its pouch.

Maglor got on his knees, and Sören sensed across their bond that he was having a moment of silence for Maedhros. Sören put a hand on Maglor's shoulder and then after a moment, he got on his knees as well. In his mind's eye Sören could suddenly see Fëanor's eldest son so clearly, tall, copper hair to his knees, fierce countenance, savage in battle, fearing no one, breaking only at the end, when he'd endured so much suffering. Maedhros was as a living sword, pledged to defend his family, his people. He had lived as a sword aflame, carrying Fëanor's fire - his warmth, his kindness, his laughter, his strong sense of purpose and conviction - after Fëanor was gone. It was losing Maedhros more than his other siblings that had destroyed Maglor inside, not just because of being closest in age and virtually inseparable growing up, but how very *alike* Maedhros and Fëanor had been in personality, even as they had also been very different; Maedhros was no scholar, no artisan. But he had been truest to Fëanor's legacy in his defiance, his strength of will, until the every end.

"Maitimo," Maglor said, bowing his head with reverence.

For just a few seconds, Sören swore he could hear a didgeridoo, which made no sense to him. And then he felt the ground beneath them quake - not hard, but enough to make Sören tumble against Maglor, who caught him, held him as the ground quivered. Dooku quickly got on his knees now as well, and Sören looked up at the sky burning red, streaked with orange and gold in delicate plumes like phoenix feathers.

The chasm began to glow, brilliant white, until the white was drowning out the sunset, a flood of pure light. Sören could feel the heat, almost too hot, and it was coming towards them. He held out his hand and with the Force he *pulled*, until he felt it in his palm like an egg of faceted glass, pulsing. Maglor began to sob, and they leaned on each other, tears falling down Sören's cheeks as well.

Dooku - shaking as much from the awe of the moment as well as feeling a bit rattled after the quake - came over and put an arm around each of them. Then, when he drew his arms back, the Silmaril rose from Sören's hand, and into Dooku's waiting, upturned hands. He held it with a look of mingled sorrow and relief, his own eyes too bright. Sören stood, finally, and so did Maglor. They each put an arm around Dooku's waist, and Sören reached out and the Silmaril floated back into his palm.

"I'm glad you were here for the second one," Sören husked.

And yet, as glad as he was to have two of the three Silmarils now, he felt a pang of regret, wishing Finarfin, wherever he was, had been here to see it as well. *I hope we can find Finarfin before we claim the last one.* Sören looked up at the fiery sunset and wondered where in the world his other brother was. What he was doing now.

Then he looked at the family he did have with him - Maglor, and Dooku-Fingolfin. He kissed each of them in turn, a sweet, lingering kiss. And then they fell on each other, kissing hard, fierce, a hunger in them awakened by the claiming of the second Silmaril. Now they needed to claim each other.

It scarcely mattered that they were on a glacier, that it was October in Iceland and almost nightfall. Their immortality gave them some immunity against the cold, the Silmarils were like a small heater, and their passion *burned*. Dooku used the Force to pull a blanket out of the back of the jeep, which made Sören laugh - echoing - as Dooku used the Force to

spread it onto the ground. And then right there, on the volcano, they stripped each other down, not caring. Needing. This was all that mattered, right now, that need to be *together*.

They continued to take turns kissing each other, hands sliding over each other's bodies, needing to touch, feel. Then the three were devouring each other, Sören's cock in Dooku's mouth, Maglor's cock in Sören's mouth, Dooku's cock in Maglor's mouth, groaning, hands playing over what flesh they could reach. When Dooku's tongue slipped into him Sören cried out, and again when Sören knew he was being readied, prepared, for what was to come.

They re-positioned and, feverishly, Sören straddled Dooku's hips "reverse cowgirl" and began to bounce on his cock, with Maglor's cock in his mouth, as Maglor grabbed Sören's head, pet his curls, moaning sweetly and musically. Sören rode to climax, Dooku coming in him at the same time, and Maglor came a few seconds later, brought off by the sight and sound of his lovers coming together. Then Maglor pushed Sören down on the blanket and ate Dooku's seed out of him, Sören writhing and howling. And then, before Sören could climax from Maglor's tongue, Maglor drew Sören into his arms, onto his lap. Sören impaled himself on Maglor's cock, kissing him passionately, and after he'd been riding for a moment Dooku got behind him and pushed into Sören as well, arms around Sören from behind, hairy chest teasing Sören's sensitive back. Dooku began to kiss and lick Sören's neck and shoulders, knowing Sören was sensitive there as well, and when he tilted Sören's face to kiss his mouth, Sören almost cried from the sweetness of the kiss, almost came right then from the passion of it.

Sören was so full, and it felt so right, to be taken this way by both of them, right here right now, after finding the Silmaril. Held safe and tight in their arms as their cocks worked inside him, rubbing him deliciously, Sören lost himself in pleasure, in lust, in love. He had never felt so alive in his life, and it felt like nothing could touch them, like this wasn't just sex, wasn't just a celebration, but was an act of magic, of power, stating to the universe that they would never be ripped apart from each other again.

As they trembled together, panting, gasping for breath, so close to orgasm yet wanting to make this last, needing to feel their bodies together, their hearts and souls together, as long as possible, the Silmarils rose. Maglor grabbed onto one, Dooku the other, and they were enveloped in pure white light, like the volcano didn't exist anymore, the sunset-into-twilight sky didn't exist anymore, the world didn't exist anymore, it was just their passion and the light of their love.

And when they came together, Sören wept with the intensity of their release, euphoria like he'd never known before, exquisite joy. *We belong.*

Sören passed out and had to be dressed, and carried into the back of the jeep. He had a moment of waking up to giggle at it - he still felt like he was made of jelly and couldn't remember his name, let alone move his limbs - and then he dozed off again. He came to just as they were pulling into the hotel parking lot, and Sören leaned on Maglor as they walked in behind Dooku, who mentioned the room he'd booked, and the concierge gave them a strange look - it was 2020, but three men sharing a king bed was still perhaps not the most common thing - before handing over the key.

They unloaded, and Dooku promptly ordered room service. As they waited, the three cuddled, and Sören made a purring noise of contentment.

But when room service arrived with dinner, the cozy, all-is-right-with-the-world feeling shoved off for a moment, replaced by a note of concern. *Shit got real,* Sören thought to himself, looking over at the satchel where the Silmarils were carefully hidden. It was one thing to have one Silmaril, another thing to have two.

Where do we go from here?

Sören tried to push that concern aside as he enjoyed an assortment of fish, delicately seasoned with salt, pepper, and herbs. *Be here now.* He looked out at the window, at the mountain view, and said a silent prayer for Finarfin, wherever he was. *Please be all right. Come back to me.*

Chapter 6

The next few days after they came back from their weekend trip, Sören was in better spirits, having claimed the second Silmaril. But on the night of Thursday the eighth, the feeling of foreboding returned.

It occurred to Sören that they had been putting up a good front of quiet, "normal" domestic bliss - a triad of three queer men wasn't exactly "normal" in 2020 and they were still about as "normal" as it got in those circumstances, to the outside world - and it was not dissimilar to everything he knew about his parents' relationship. The young, happy married couple who secretly were both Force sensitive... and were secretly both cursed by gods, harassed and attacked. Sören was older than both his parents were when they died, and he had certain advantages they didn't, such as the gift of no longer aging which had made some physiological changes, made his body harder to hurt, harder to kill. But Ingwion had warned him that someday Sören would have to face Odin – that sooner or later, Odin was going to try to bring about the Ragnarök - to force Sören's hand and see if he could defeat the Fenrir-wolf prophesied to kill him. His mother had died performing a spell to "blind" Odin and keep him from looking at Sören and his siblings, beyond what he'd already seen. Now that two of the three Silmarils were here, he couldn't shake the feeling that with their brightness, Odin was finally seeing him.

Sören found himself unable to sleep, staying up all night reading his father's diary.

Most of the journal entries were about dreams, visions, and the not-coincidences in the waking day - nearly missed accidents that were getting so frequent and numerous that Sigurð stopped counting them - and not just Sigurð's own, but reporting that Brynhildur was having the same experiences, and the children were often disturbed. One of the most harrowing entries was reading about himself waking up screaming, and Sigurð and Brynhildur both heard a voice mocking them: "*My, the little wolf does howl! I wonder if he'll scream like that when I cut out his heart.*"

Sigurð went on to mention that he asked Odin, "Why do you not just kill him now?" - adding as clarification that he did not want Sören dead, but he was curious why Odin was prolonging this if he saw such a threat.

And Odin said, "I do not kill children. There are limits to even my cruelty. Besides... you know I live for battle. For strife. A fight against a small child, however gifted, is quickly over and done."

As the journal entries wore on, Sigurð was now intensely studying Norse mythology. Icelandic schoolchildren were generally familiar with their country's history which included its legends - the average Icelander was as well-versed on Norse myth as a comparative mythology student in another country - but Sigurð dug deeper, trying to understand his opponent. He read not just myth, but historical documents, including comparing history from other Germanic cultures. It seemed fairly consistent that Odin/Woden/Wodan was a war god, encouraging tribe to rise up against tribe, slaughter and pillage. And he demanded bloody sacrifices, like the "nine nines" given at Uppsala in Sweden, nine males of every species - including human - once a year.

One of the things that Sigurð noted about Odin's narrative was that he was fond of disguising himself and wandering. Sigurð noted that in other cultures, their gods and other supernatural beings tended to have fantastic appearances - the animal-headed Egyptian deities, the angels of the People of the Book who were no innocent-faced ethereal

cherubs but were described as eldritch abominations with multiple eyes and wings and limbs, sometimes not even taking a humanoid shape at all but looking like a mechanical wheel. Even the Greek gods, who could shapeshift to romance mortals, were not very good at blending in. Sigurð mused in a journal entry whether or not Odin had once been human or something like a human, which was how he could take on a human-like appearance in his travels.

This disturbed Sigurð enough that one night, he and Brynhildur reconstructed the ancient practice of seiðr, inducing a visionary journey. Sigurð went back in time and saw Wodanaz, an ancient Germanic shaman-chieftain, and his people struggling for survival during a harsh winter that was longer than usual. He and his brothers slew a frost giant, named Ymir, and the winter ended and they took over Ymir's territory. But more than that, Wodanaz "drank" Ymir's power.

And then he didn't stop there. He set his tribe on other tribes, and when he broke their idols he performed a shamanic journey to kill their gods and "eat" their power. Soon he could travel without doing the ritual - in flesh, not just vision. He had been an old man close to death's door and he stopped aging. He grew stronger and stronger, more and more powerful. And where he had started off on this path to keep his people alive, now he had no compassion for what he perceived as weakness. He took pleasure from inciting and watching slaughter, pleasure in "culling the herd" with sacrifices. He liked having power, and he used it to inflict suffering rather than prevent it.

At the end of the vision, Sigurð was no longer an observer in time, but Odin approached him and confirmed everything he'd seen was true. And asked him a simple question: "Would you know more?"

The next several entries from Sigurð were filled with seething anger - Sören would have smiled at the swearing and mockery, recognizing it as something he did, like father like son, except Sören was angry too, for the same reason. It was bad enough that Odin was attacking a family and claiming it was some sort of self-preservation. It was worse to know that he enjoyed it.

And then there was the final entry from Sigurð, saying he was going to face Odin himself, the next time he felt Odin's energy hanging around. That he was going to not even give Odin a chance to meet Sören in battle as an adult, but was going to end it himself, once and for all, because Odin needed to pay for what he'd done.

The coroner's report had called it a stroke. Sören wondered how far Sigurð had gotten, and had a feeling it wasn't far, Odin making short work of him. *Brave but foolish.*

And he was still proud of his father. He had tried. He had shown courage to the bitter end.

Early Friday morning Sören went to walk Huan and watch the sunrise. Usually going for a long walk would be enough to tire him out enough to want to take a nap – indeed, that was why he'd gone on the walk. But if anything, he felt even more awake now, like he'd just been given a shot of caffeine, and it made him wonder why.

As Sören came back from walking Huan and watching the sunrise on the morning of Friday, October ninth, he felt a strange sense of foreboding. Usually going for a long walk like the one he'd just taken would be enough to tire him out enough to want to take a nap - indeed, that was exactly why he'd gone on the walk, after a restless, sleepless night. But if anything, he felt even more awake now, like he'd just been given a shot of caffeine, and it made him wonder why.

Maglor and Dooku found him at the kitchen table, drinking coffee, which was probably the last thing Sören needed right now, but he didn't care.

Maglor narrowed his eyes. "Ada, go to bed."

"No." Sören sipped his coffee. "Can't sleep."

"I can help put you to sleep."

Sören was aware of that. Now he admitted, "Won't sleep." He looked out the window. "I feel really uneasy right now, like it's for the best I stay awake, or something."

"Yeah, I saw your father's journal on the coffee table." Maglor folded his arms.

Sören took a few deep breaths, collecting his thoughts. "I got through my father's journal."

"That must have been hard," Maglor said, nodding.

"It was a bit worse than I anticipated."

Maglor waited.

"One of the things that came up in the lecture is that the 'gods' of this world don't deserve to be gods because they don't understand humanity. They were born as gods, they've never known what it's like to be human and to suffer the same way humans do. But Freyr wasn't born that way, and I don't think Loki was either. And when I was reading my father's journal... well, Odin and the Aesir, they used to be human. Odin got his start as a chieftain named Wodanaz. He killed a frost giant named Ymir, and took his powers... and went on from there. He understands what it's like to be human. He also rejected it and he... he got his kicks from making humans suffer for being 'weak'. My father saw all this in a vision, and Odin himself confirmed to him it was all true. And *that* made my father go berserk, and the next time Odin came round to harass them... he went after him. Which is why he's not alive now."

"That's terrible," Maglor said, and Dooku nodded.

Sören also nodded. "I think it's even worse than a god who just doesn't get it and humans are this weird alien thing that they're detached from. Odin was a *traitor* to the world he came from. I can't blame my father for reacting the way he did. He probably knew he was going to die, but he wanted to take Odin out with him, I guess, or at least... injure him. Which. You know." Sören's eyes met Dooku's. "Is like nothing we've ever seen before."

Dooku made a noise and looked away. Sören felt that little sting of remembering Fingolfin's death - Fëanor had long since been dead, but Sören remembered his reaction to reading about it, and then it was even worse when he saw and felt it across his Force bond with Dooku, the memories that Dooku now lived with.

"And foolish that he was, for taking on a god... he had something special." Sören pursed his lips.

Dooku sat down at the table and used the Force to fix himself a cup of coffee as he took Sören's hands and looked into his eyes with love and worry. Sören's lips quirked with mild amusement as he watched the coffee pot pour into a mug without being touched, then the fridge opened and out came the cream, then a spoon dipped into the sugar bowl and put in two sugars, all without being touched. "Odin is a concern," Dooku said, "but not our

most immediate concern. You've had a rough time of things lately -"

"We all have," Sören said.

"We all have," Dooku said, nodding. "But as you know, Sören, you've always been a bit high-strung. I think if you can't sleep, you should have some sort of distraction."

“Well, there's classes today.”

Maglor looked at Dooku, and Dooku nodded, as if they had discussed something privately. Maglor turned back to Sören and said, "I'm about to suggest something you won't like, and it would be remiss of me not to suggest it anyway."

Sören grasped at levity. "Hi About To Suggest Something You Won't Like -"

Maglor glared. "*Adar.*"

Sören elbowed him, and with an exaggerated sigh, tousling Sören's curls, Maglor went on. "I think you ought to take today off from the studio. And I will too."

Sören gave him a look. "Oh, come on -"

"No, listen. You..." Maglor pinched the bridge of his nose. "You're in a *really* bad place, mentally."

"Which is exactly why I should push myself, and not sit at home, moping -"

"Which is exactly why you'll fall apart in front of your class again. Sören, I don't want to be an ass to you and sound patronizing. But I really think you're too stressed out right now to have your studio open. You need a mental health week. The last time you took a vacation was the holidays last year. I won't count when you went to Canada to see Dag and your nieces when they were born back in March because that was just a weekend which you take off anyway. So you're overdue. At least start with a mental health day.”

Sören considered, and finally, he simply nodded. "Fine, you win."

He didn't feel great about closing the studio for a week, and he couldn't shake the feeling as he typed up the announcement and sent out the e-mail that he was setting a bad precedent - he had the briefest frisson, the feeling of apprehension that the studio was never going to open again.

Then Sören said, “What would you propose as a distraction, then?”

“Let's get you out of the house,” Maglor said.

"I don't want to do anything that requires me flying into Reykjavik.”

"OK, so we'll keep it reasonably local. Your call, though," Maglor said.

Sören thought for a few minutes and then he said, "What about the Botanical Garden? And then a drive out to the Nature Baths at Lake Mývatn? We have a hot tub and all, but going to an actual hot spring sounds really, really good right about now."

"We can do that," Maglor said.

Sören looked at Dooku. "You coming with us?"

"Ordinarily I wouldn't miss the opportunity to accompany you to Lake Mývatn," Dooku said, "considering my first experience in the Nature Baths was the first time I saw the aurora and was just before the first time we made love." Dooku smiled fondly, his eyes twinkling with the memory. Sören couldn't help smiling back, watching the memory across their bond - *feeling* it, how much they loved each other then, how much passion there was between them... how that love and passion had grown stronger with time since then. Sören could feel how much Dooku cherished that memory, and Sören did as well. Sören felt a sharp ache - he didn't want to turn back time and lose what they'd found, what they'd built, since then, but he wished he could revisit the magic of that particular moment just once. Before Sören could get too caught up in the urge to nag Dooku to come along, Dooku said, "I do have writing to work on - I woke up with a head full of ideas this morning and I should like to strike while the inspiration is there."

"All right." Sören couldn't blame him for that, considering his own tendency for the muse to seize him at inconvenient times, and refuse to cooperate when he actually had free time. "So it's just you and me, then," Sören said, turning to Maglor.

"We'll take Huan, too."

_

No matter how many times Sören had been to the Botanical Garden in Akureyri - and it was countless times, now - it never got old. He loved walking around and admiring all the pretty flowers, different shapes and colors and scents - poppies and pansies, marigolds and margaritas, lobelia, dianthus, cosmos, among others. He also loved the way the garden was laid out, the pathways and fountains and pond and shrubs and trees, the cute little houses on the property. The rain had stopped for today and underneath the bright blue sky and fluffy white clouds, it was the perfect day to look at the flowers, to take everything in, one of the simple joys of living. He loved the presence of beauty, that feeling of *life*, the vibrant energy thrumming, the flowers wild but also peaceful.

"In a way it's so fitting that you were reborn here," Maglor said softly as they dallied at the orange poppies. "My fireflower, in the land of flowers."

Sören grabbed Maglor and kissed him hard, moved to tears by his words.

Huan loved the walk in the garden, and only gave a little whine of protest when Maglor put him in the jeep just before they went to the garden's cafe. At the cafe in the garden they had a treat - Sören and Maglor split an assortment of cookies, and Sören also indulged himself with a piece of strawberry cake. Maglor stole a bite of the cake and Sören tweaked his nose, and Maglor gave him a cheeky grin before giving Sören a noogie. They had coffee and played footsie under the table, and Sören was feeling a little randy by the time they got back in the jeep. The thought of Maglor showering naked at the Nature Baths and sitting in his trunks in the hot spring did nothing to calm Sören's libido, and Maglor snickered at Sören being proudly erect once they stripped down for the obligatory shower before entering the Nature Baths.

It was just them on an early weekday afternoon in October, though Sören knew the hot spring might get more traffic later in the evening, with it being a Friday night. The waitstaff would bring beverages out to people sitting in the spring, and Sören ordered beer for both of them, the frosty beer a nice contrast to the heat of the water. He felt a little bad about Huan waiting in the jeep, but it wasn't too hot for him to be in there - the window was open partway besides, to give the dog some air - and they wouldn't be terribly long.

Though Sören had been feeling horny on the way to Lake Mývatn and they were alone in the hot spring, they weren't completely alone - it was still public enough that Sören didn't want to risk fooling around. So he and Maglor just cuddled together, stealing the occasional kiss... and they relaxed together. The uneasiness of the sleepless night and earlier that morning had started to fade when they visited the flowers, and now here in the hot spring the rest of it melted and flowed away. Sören leaned on Maglor's shoulder, sipping at the beer bottle, staring up at the endless blue sky, and took a moment to express silent gratitude to the universe for what he had. Through all of the tragedy and pain of his life, cursed by gods, he'd managed to forge some hard-won joy. Life had been pretty good for the last couple of years. He had two amazing men in his life, and had been given the gift of immortality to spend eternity with them, to watch the history of the world unfold in exciting new directions.

"*Ég elska þig, ástin mín.*" Sören gave Maglor a kiss.

Maglor stroked Sören's face, smiling at him adoringly, and their noses rubbed together before Maglor whispered, "*Eu também te amo, meu precioso garoto querido.*" He kissed Sören back.

Sören kissed him harder. "You know what it does to me when you talk to me in Portuguese."

Maglor smirked. "You know what it does to me when you talk to me in Icelandic."

"No, you doing that is way more unfair." Sören kissed him again. He took Maglor's free hand and slid it down under the water to the hard bulge in his trunks. "You got me all worked up again."

"You get yourself worked up, you horndog." Maglor nibbled on his neck, and Sören felt like screaming.

Nonetheless, once they finished their bottles of beer a few minutes later, Sören began dragging Maglor out of the hot spring, Maglor laughing all the way. Sören was tempted to throw him in the back seat of the jeep and ride him, and Maglor sensed the surge of lust across their bond, tsked, and said, "This is still kind of public." He patted Sören's ass. "Here, drive us home and we'll get Nicolae to have some fun with us."

They let Huan out of the jeep for a few minutes so he could run around in the fresh air, and then Sören scooped up the dog for kisses, telling him "what a good boy, waiting for us." He put Huan back in the back seat of the jeep, who seemed just happy to be out, tongue lolling with contentment.

Then Huan let out a plaintive whimper, that went well beyond being put back in the vehicle.

The ground shook. Sören was both surprised and not surprised to feel an earthquake - there had been a small one when they'd visited Eyjafjallajökull less than a week ago, and usually when there was one earthquake there would be more in the days that followed. But it was still unexpected, and even a small earthquake made his legs feel like rubber, Sören leaning on the jeep, Maglor steadying him.

Sören got in the driver's seat and Maglor in the passenger's seat. Sören took a few minutes to catch his breath and calm down, and then once he turned the ignition, Maglor smirked and said, "Here, I can help calm your anxiety." He put a playlist in the car stereo.

Sören rolled his eyes and chuckled at the sultry sounds of Sade.

If I tell you
If I tell you now
Will you keep on
Will you keep on loving me
If I tell you
If I tell you how I feel
Will you keep bringing out the best in me

You give me, you give me the sweetest taboo
You give me, you're giving me the sweetest taboo
Too good for me

Maglor waggled his eyebrows and Sören lost it. But then the silliness gave way to a more sensual mood at the next song, "Wicked Game" by Chris Isaak.

The world was on fire and no one could save me but you
It's strange what desire will make foolish people do
I never dreamed that I'd meet somebody like you
I never dreamed I'd love somebody like you
I don't want to fall in love
No I don't want to fall in love with you

What a wicked game to play
To make me feel this way
What wicked thing to do
To let me dream of you

"OK, this is doing nothing to help me not be horny right now," Sören said, turning off the music, "and we've got a bit of a drive to get home."

"Allllllllllll right." Maglor gave an exaggerated sigh. "You pick the music, then."

Though Sören and Maglor both liked goth music, it was a bright, cheery day and Sören was actually in a good mood - despite the earthquake - and he didn't want something that would make him pensive. So he defaulted to a playlist of pop, R&B and hip-hop. Maglor gave an affectionate eyeroll as "Rock Your Body" by Justin Timberlake came on, and snickered as Sören belted it out, singing the chorus in a falsetto.

Don't be so quick to walk away (Dance with me)
I wanna rock your body, please stay (Dance with me)
You don't have to admit you wanna play (Dance with me)
Just let me rock you till the break of day (Dance with me)

Got time, but I don't mind
Just wanna rock you, girl
I'll have whatever you have
Come on let's give it a whirl

See, I've been watchin' you
And I like the way you move
So go 'head, girl, just do it
That ass shakin' thing you do

So you grab your girls and you grab a couple more
And you all could meet me in the middle of the floor
Said the air is thick, it's smellin' right
So you pass to the left, then you sail to the right

Don't be so quick to walk away (Dance with me)
I wanna rock your body, please stay (Dance with me)
You don't have to admit you wanna play (Dance with me)
Just let me rock you till the break of day (Dance with me)

Then, a couple minutes later, Maglor amused Sören by singing the female part of the song.

{Talk to me, boy} No disrespect, I don't mean no harm
{Talk to me, boy} I can't wait to have you in my arms
{Talk to me, boy} Hurry up 'cause you're takin' too long
{Talk to me, boy} Bet I'll have you naked by the end of this song

So what did you come here for {I came to dance with you}
You don't wanna hit the floor {Get some romance with you}
Been searchin' for love for evermore {I'll take a chance}
If love is here on the floor, girl

At the end of the song Maglor said, "You said you were going to have me naked by the end of this song."

Sören blew a raspberry at him, just before he recognized the opening notes of "Happy" by Pharrell Williams.

It might seem crazy what I'm about to say

Sören's face lit up. "I love this song!" He turned it up and began to bob his head. Maglor did too.

Sunshine she's here, you can take a break
I'm a hot air balloon that could go to space
With the air, like I don't care, baby, by the way

Then suddenly, Sören felt a chill down his spine, even as the temperature inside the jeep seemed to shoot up. In Sören's mind's eye everything was going white - and not just in his mind's eye, but the view from the jeep was going white too.

(Because I'm happy)
Clap along if you feel like a room without a roof
(Because I'm happy)
Clap along if you feel like happiness is the truth
(Because I'm happy)
Clap along if you know what happiness is to you
(Because I'm happy)
Clap along if you feel like that's what you wanna do

Sören could see Finarfin, then Fingolfin, struck by dark lightning, vaporized, and felt an intense surge of rage-grief, mirrored by Fëanor. *No,* Fëanor cried out. *My Arafinwë, my Ñolofinwë...* It was as if Fëanor's very soul had been ripped out.

Fëanor now understood the nothing-left-to-lose feeling that had brought Fingolfin to stand against the Dark Lord, that had brought Finarfin to pursue the Balrogs that had slain his eldest brother. Sören could feel the Silmarils burning on Fëanor's brow elsewhere, hot, hot, heat, like a reactor about to explode. He could feel pressure building within him. Now the road and the jeep were getting swallowed up by white and all that existed was Fëanor's heat, his rage, the indescribable pain and torment.

You fool. Fëanor's voice, and it was directed at Melkor, terrible devouring darkness, the fabric of space whirling in his great dark limbs. The horns on his helm felt like they could stab Fëanor across the distance. *Do you not understand what you have just brought upon yourself.*

Do you *understand that I am sick and sore of this*obsession *with you? How dare you exist as you do, you and your blood... I have gone mad with you. There is no line I will not cross, Fëanor, to be rid of you and my obsession once and for all. Nothing I will not do to be* free *of this madness, this torment.*

A wry chuckle from Fëanor - a deceptively calm gesture as the pressure and heat was rising, rising, rising, more of the world swallowed up in blinding white. *You would do anything?*

Here come bad news, talking this and that (Yeah!)
Well, give me all you got, don't hold it back (Yeah!)
Well, I should probably warn you, I'll be just fine (Yeah!)
No offense to you, don't waste your time, here's why

The booming reply from Melkor, eons of weariness in his voice.*Anything.*

Fëanor narrowed his eyes. *Then perish.*

And then Fëanor closed his eyes and with one last vision of Finarfin and his silver-gold hair, Fingolfin and his star-blue eyes, the gathering rage and light went off, like a bomb, only far, far, far more terrible, far more deadly. The infinite-bright struck the infinite-dark of Melkor's horns and ripped through the rest of him, tearing apart the weave of space that he had devoured, pulsing within him...

(Because I'm happy)
Clap along if you feel like a room without a roof
(Because I'm happy)
Clap along if you feel like happiness is the truth
(Because I'm happy)
Clap along if you know what happiness is to you
(Because I'm happy)
Clap along if you feel like that's what you wanna do

Bring me down, can't nuthin' (happy)
Bring me down
My level is too high to bring me down (happy)
Can't nuthin', bring me down (happy)
I said, let me tell you now, unh (happy)
Bring me down, can't nuthin', bring me down (happy, happy, happy)
My level is too high to bring me down (happy, happy, happy)
Can't nuthin' bring me down (happy, happy, happy)

Sören lost control of the wheel, the intense pressure in his head too much to bear. For a

moment he was reminded of finding his mother dead when he was not yet six, the coroner's report saying it was an aneurysm. Wondering if he was going to die, whether from whatever was happening in his head or the jeep now skittering on the Ring Road, no longer driving in a straight line but veering hard to the side, turning, turning, turning...

Maglor shouted and Huan howled just as the jeep struck a road sign pole, the back windows shattering with the impact.

_

In Akureyri, Nicolae Dooku jumped and spilled hot tea all over himself, as Snúdur yowled and ran to hide under the couch.

In Reykjavik, Frankie O'Riordan was grocery shopping with her wife Margrét Sigurðsdóttir and fainted. Margrét took out her phone to call the paramedics but when she opened her mouth, no sound came out, and she couldn't stop shaking.

In Toronto, Ontario, Dagnýr Sigurðsson fainted at the end of a class, on the university campus.

In Reykjavik, Ari Einarsson dropped a d20 and when he went to retrieve it from the floor he ended up staying down in the crash-fold position, like there was an air raid. A friend got on the floor next to him, concerned. "Are you OK?" Ari shook his head, trembling.

In Adelaide, Australia, a truck driver named Alinta Jonsson woke up from a sound sleep with a shout as she dreamed of being out with her partner and children and suddenly the city was turned into an apocalyptic wasteland, with everyone dying, just before she died too. Her partner Kenny Kim also screamed, just before rolling against her and clinging in a fierce, tight hug, the two of them sobbing together uncontrollably.

In London, England at the MI6 headquarters, Letitia Fetherstonhaugh and an operative named Anthony Hewlett-Johnson were heading towards a stairwell. Anthony startled at nothing and tripped and fell down a flight of stairs, spraining his ankle. An accident that would normally only be mildly upsetting turned him into a hyperventilating mess, trying desperately to pull himself together as Letitia hovered.

_

Maglor was pulling Sören out of the jeep now. Sören started to come to. He saw the wreck of the jeep and started to cry. "Oh god. Oh god I'm so sorry. I'm so sorry -"

Huan was shaking, whining.

"Ada, just..." Maglor was shaking as he pulled his cell phone out of his pocket. "It's gonna be OK." But across their Force bond, they both knew that whatever had just happened was the opposite of OK. Maglor hit a number on speed dial and took a few steps away, nervously pacing around. Sören watched as Maglor said, "Letitia, hi, this is Mark Lowry." Sören blinked, always a bit startled at the name MI6 knew him by. "We got into a bit of an accident on the Ring Road and we need a ride home and to avoid dealing with the police if possible." There was Letitia's fast questions - her voice seemed unusually loud - and

Maglor's assurance of "It was just our vehicle, we hit a pole, no other party, road is otherwise empty for now, but we want to clear out of here before anyone sees us." Maglor waited and Sören heard Letitia's voice and a male voice going back and forth, then Letitia's voice again, and a moment later Maglor was nodding and said, "Thanks, Letitia, you're the best."

Sören sat down on the ground - he was tempted to just lay down. He felt as if he'd just died, yet somehow he was still alive. The first thing he did was reach out in the Force to poke Dooku, after seeing Fingolfin vaporized. Dooku was definitely still alive, but that feeling of Not Okay was now running on an amplifier.

Huan put his front paws on Sören's shoulders and began to lick Sören's face, the dog's eyes impossibly sad.

"*What* the bloody hell was that?" Sören asked.

Maglor sat down next to Sören as Huan got down and went to him for pettings. "I think that was the Dagor Dagorath happening in another universe."

Huan gave a long, pitiful whimper and hung his head, as if to confirm.

"Well." Sören swallowed hard. From out of nowhere, he remembered the quote from the Trinity test of the Manhattan Project, and it came out of him now. "Now we are all sons of bitches."

Chapter 7

I died, elsewhere.

Dooku lost track of the time he'd been sitting there after spilling the tea. Usually he'd be prompt about cleaning up a spill, not wanting to stain his clothing or anything else the tea got on. And instead, he was sitting there in a state of shock, trembling, heart racing, head dizzy. If he hadn't taken the blood from Ingwion over a year ago he'd be wondering if he was having a heart attack. If he was at death's door.

Instead, it was another version of him that died. An older, more powerful version - Fingolfin. He had felt, for an instant, like he was going up in flame. Like the way Fëanor had died, but worse. Far worse.

He didn't know what the rest of the outcome of the Dagorath was – or where it was, in some other universe somewhere - , he just knew that Fingolfin was gone. And though it was elsewhere, and his prior incarnation, it nonetheless felt very, very present, like a piece of Dooku's own soul had died. There was a hollow, weary, hopeless feeling now.

He was only sort of snapped out of the shock when he heard a truck pulling up in front of the house. He'd vaguely been aware of his cell phone going off and hadn't answered it, too much in a state of shock for it to fully register, for him to move his body and find the words to answer it. He looked out the window - finally moving part of his body - and he watched as Sören and Maglor got out of the truck. He blinked with surprise.

Sören and Maglor came in slowly, heads hung, looking like they'd just been through something awful. Huan let out a whine, and trotted off to the kitchen for water. Then Sören and Maglor paused, and looked at Dooku for a minute - looking, not saying anything - and Dooku looked at them, trying to refocus his attention on the men he loved instead of that feeling of devastation, desolation.

And then Sören and Maglor rushed over to him. Sören fell on his knees with a sob and his arms wrapped around Dooku, holding him so tight it almost hurt.

"Nico," Sören wept. "Oh god. Nico..." He began to rock Dooku, his breath coming in shuddery gasps and then Sören was just wailing, keening, tears flooding his cheeks as he buried his face in Dooku's chest. "Nico. *Nico...*"

Dooku looked in Maglor's eyes, wanting to weep himself at the haunted look in them, the grief on Maglor's face. He found himself reaching out to touch Maglor's face, stroke his cheek, pet his hair as the glamour dropped, hair falling from the middle of his back to his thighs. And then Maglor broke as well, taking Dooku's hand and kissing it before he clung, sobbing on Dooku's shoulder.

"So you felt something," Dooku choked out, his voice raspy.

Sören nodded. He picked his head up - the look of pain on his face, the sadness in those sweet brown eyes made Dooku want to rip his own heart out to make Sören feel better. "Felt. Saw. You..." Sören couldn't say it. He broke again, falling apart, howling.

"I know." Dooku closed his eyes and let out a shuddery sigh. "Fingolfin died in the Dagorath. I don't know about the others, but..."

"I would be very surprised if Fëanor survived... his... my... reaction to your death. And Finarfin's." Sören said it and then he wept some more, shaking, gasping for breath. He was ugly, messy crying now, getting snot all over his face and all over Dooku's shirt. Maglor used the Force to bring over a box of tissues. "It was like a nuke going off, Nico. And..." Sören closed his eyes, winced, and when he opened them, he said, "I could feel that too. Nothing else mattered to him, after he lost you."

Dooku's own tears spilled, silently. He looked out the window - looked not at anything in particular, but far away... reliving Fingolfin's final moments in the life he remembered, where he'd stood against Morgoth. His rage for his beloved Fëanor, all that he had lost - nothing left to lose. As he fell, he had a vision of Fëanor, bringing him comfort as his broken body gave out, drew its last breath. In the other universe, Fingolfin had been resurrected – one of the universes Freyr and Loki had seen, and spoken of – and Fingolfin had gotten more time with Fëanor.

But not enough. They had tried to take down Morgoth once and for all, and Fingolfin had once again fallen, this time even more gruesomely than before. No doubt, Fëanor would react. The question was *how*. What did that mean for everyone else.

The look of madness in Sören's eyes - the hysteria he could feel rising in Sören, across their bond - made Dooku afraid of the answer to that question.

The sharp pain of knowing he'd lost to Morgoth a second time, somewhere - and this time it had likely cost Fëanor his life as well - faded and was once again replaced by that awful numb, hollow, dead-inside feeling. Dooku felt almost like he was hearing the words come out of someone else when he spoke again. "You came here in a tow truck," he said matter-of-factly.

Sören and Maglor looked at each other, Sören took a deep breath, and they nodded.

"We got into a little accident," Maglor said. "Hit a pole."

"By we he means me," Sören said. "The vision just...*seized* me. I had no control over it, it took control of me... I lost control of the jeep." Sören cried. "I'm so sorry."

"A vehicle is replaceable," Dooku said, taking Sören's hands. "You are not."

"Neither are you." Sören started to cry again, quivering against Dooku, such broken tears that it brought Dooku out of that numb place just a little and he started to cry again as well.

"No one else was on the road," Maglor said, taking a tissue to wipe Dooku's eyes, his face. "Just us. I called Letitia to do some emergency cleanup - she used the GPS on my phone to send a tow truck out to us, and also, ah... a couple of field operatives to take care of the wreck. The jeep wasn't totalled but Letitia doesn't want there to be any evidence of an accident so... we're going to have to get a new vehicle."

"Jesus." Dooku was still continually amazed and unnerved by the cloak-and-dagger nature of their existence these days.

"When we've had some time to decompress," Maglor said, getting up, "we'll go to a rental, take a few days before we go to a dealership for a new jeep." He took Dooku's tea mug and walked out to the kitchen.

Maglor made more tea, and somehow, the three of them ended up on the couch, Dooku

in the middle with Maglor and Sören on either side of him. Dooku sipped his tea but again, he felt like an automaton, his body leaden, feeling as if he were going through the motions and any sensory input - the heat of the tea, the scent, the taste - were dulled and he was experiencing it vicariously.

Sören's hysteria had exhausted itself... for now. He was still shedding silent tears, looking utterly lost. His voice sounded tired and ancient when he said, "Everything fucking *hurts.*"

"Yes," Maglor said. "Yes it does." He sipped his tea and frowned. "I can't be positive, but I think I died too." He closed his eyes and then he let out a sob - Maglor, who had tried to be calm and pull everyone together, was now breaking himself. "I can't hear the Song. It just... it just stopped. It's so *quiet*..."

And that, *that* wounded Dooku as well, like adding insult to injury. It was bad enough to know another universe's Fingolfin was gone, to feel it, to know that universe's Finarfin was gone as well and Fëanor had probably sacrificed himself to take out Melkor in the throes of his grief. But to lose the Song also...

"No," Sören sobbed, and then he started to cry even harder than before, prostrating himself on the floor, screaming, kicking. "No..."

Dooku covered his face in his hands. He had felt Fingolfin go up in a bolt of dark lightning, unbearable heat that would have made him shriek if he had been capable of making sounds as the terror engulfed him, stole his very breath. Now everything was cold. So cold. And dark, the world fading away...

_

Dooku had only the vaguest memory of getting in his pajamas and retreating to bed - again, as if his mind and body had been separated, disconnected somehow. He felt the link re-form somewhat when his body stirred him to go to the bathroom, and then he crawled back in bed between Maglor and Sören. Snúður, Pumpkin, Rasputin and Huan were all on the bed with them, as if they were keeping vigil.

Sometime later, Sören mumbled, "I should feed them."

Dooku sat up slowly and nodded. "Perhaps we should eat something as well." He rubbed his face - his mouth felt dry. Every bone in his body ached, and he had a dull headache... if he wasn't immune to colds and flu now, he would think he was coming down with something. "I don't feel like cooking."

"Neither do I," Maglor said.

Sören looked at the time. "We could order, like, pizza." He scowled. "I'm not hungry."

"I'm not either," Dooku admitted, "but we should at least have some water."

"I'll get up," Sören said. He climbed out of bed, and the cats and dog followed him to the kitchen, as if they knew what was happening.

Dooku heard the sound of cans of food being opened, and a bag of dry food being shaken out, the sink being run. A few minutes later Sören came back with a pitcher of ice water and drinking glasses, and took a moment to stretch - Dooku noticed Sören was in

his pajamas too - before he got back in bed.

They all had some water, and Dooku listened to the cats and dog eating in the kitchen, the sound of which was strangely comforting, a sort of constant that he needed right now when the entire world seemed to have spun off its axis. When the cats and dog came back and got on the bed, Dooku snuggled between Sören and Maglor, with Maglor spooning him from behind, Sören's face in Dooku's chest, their arms tight around him. Dooku held one of Maglor's hands, and pet Sören with the other. The touch was grounding, soothing, and yet he still felt out of it, not all "there" yet.

He lay there in a dazed, half-asleep state, sometimes more awake and alert, sometimes more foggy and drifting. He had never felt more exhausted in his life, except when he'd had the flu in early 2018.

Just before sleep could overtake him completely, Sören's cell phone went off. Sören growled and grumbled, "*Hvað í fokk*." Dooku watched Sören use the Force to pull his phone over, and his eyes widened at the number on the screen. "Dagnýr! *Hvað segirðu*?"

Dooku faded again, only sort of listening to Sören on the phone, speaking Icelandic rapid-fire, voice rising and falling. It was a beautiful language and Dooku would normally be happy to listen to Sören speak it all day, but the distress in Sören's voice was setting him on edge, and when he heard the word "Eyjafjallajökull" and then "Katla" some seconds later, Dooku's eyes snapped open and he was fully awake. The conversation didn't last much longer, with a lot of "jæja" and "já" and finally Sören said "*Ég elska þig líka*," before he hit End.

Sören took a few deep breaths.

"That was Dagnýr?" Dooku asked, even though he knew from hearing his name at the beginning.

Sören nodded. "You know that with, ah, Matt around, he usually speaks English on the phone unless it's bad." Sören frowned. "It's bad."

"He felt it, didn't he?" Maglor asked.

Sören nodded. "He called to make sure I was OK... that we were OK. There's only so much we can get into it over the phone, Letitia wants us to be careful and I'd be careful anyway, but... he fainted at the university. He got sent to the emergency room, they did some tests, he's 'fine', but we know, of course, he's not fine. He's about as fine as we are."

"Oh dear." Dooku felt a little pang - he liked his brother-in-law, and he didn't like the thought of Dag sharing in the horror.

"He..." Sören blinked slowly. "He said that on the news, Eyjafjallajökull erupted today, and there are predictions that Katla is going to erupt. It's not *as* catastrophic as, say, Laki going off, but it's still..."

"Very non-trivial, will affect the weather, the air quality, not just for us, but for England and a lot of Europe, possibly also North America," Maglor said. Maglor's brow furrowed. "That earthquake we felt..."

"Dag gave the time of the Eyjafjallajökull eruption from the news, it wasn't that long after the quake. Which means it coincided with..." Sören's voice trailed off and he looked down,

his hands shaking. He took a few more deep breaths, but then his attempt to keep calm failed and he ended up falling apart again, hyperventilating, sobbing.

Dooku ushered Sören out of bed, got out himself, then picked Sören up, put him in the middle, and crushed Sören against him. Maglor snuggled up closer to Sören and they held him, rocked him. Dooku felt tears come to his eyes again, as well as a frisson down his spine, gooseflesh breaking over his arms. What they felt hadn't been a collective hallucination, but something *real*, and it was severe enough that the Earth herself cried out, the fires in her heart raging for the injustice done to the Spirit of Fire and his kin.

Dooku had the sickening feeling that this was just the beginning. That even though the Dagor Dagorath had been in another universe - he was still alive here, as was Maglor, as was Sören - that it had been *felt* so strongly meant that some sort of fabric of reality had gotten ripped, and a chain reaction had been set off. Dooku had no idea what was going to happen, but something told him the eruption of Eyjafjallajökull and the imminent eruption of Katla was just the start of the labor pains.

—

It rained all weekend, and Sören, Maglor, and Dooku spent most of the weekend sleeping, or half-sleeping, only getting up to visit the restroom, feed the animals, or drink; Maglor took Huan out to the yard, quick trips, when Huan had to go.

By Sunday night, they knew they had to pull themselves together at least a little bit. They took turns in the shower - getting right back into pajamas - and Sören called for pizza, not the healthiest thing in the world but it was something. While they waited for the pizza to arrive, Sören changed the catbox, making faces, and then Sören washed up, and Dooku heard him crying as he doubled over the sink and he came over, wrapping his arms around Sören from behind, pulling him up and rubbing his nose in Sören's curls, breathing in the lavender scent of Sören's shampoo.

Dooku had Sören sit on his lap until the pizza came. Once it arrived, Sören sat between Dooku and Maglor on the couch, the three of them huddled in a blanket heap even though it wasn't particularly cold in the house, but the world felt cold and the warmth was reassuring. None of the three of them were quite hungry yet, despite not having really eaten since Friday, but they nibbled at the pizza nonetheless, and Huan and the cats begged until Maglor distracted them with treats.

When they had enough, and put the rest of the pizza in the fridge, Sören looked at the clock and winced.

"I have classes tomorrow," Sören said, "and I... I can't."

"Tell them you need to take a week off," Maglor said.

"But I already took a lot of time off."

"Yes, and you gave family emergency as the reason. They don't run on a schedule. You're entitled to say you need more time."

"If I do this," Sören said, "it looks bad. I get what you're saying, but you and I are going to lose students if we take more time off. It doesn't inspire confidence that we're going to open up again."

"You already said you can't," Maglor said, giving him a stern look. "If we lose students... oh well. We have to take care of ourselves right now."

Sören used the Force to bring over his laptop and Dooku watched as Sören typed up an announcement and an e-mail letting his students know he and "Alejandro" would need an additional week to deal with the ongoing family emergency. When everything was sent out, Sören buried his face in his hands, and Dooku put an arm around him.

"Macalaurë is right," Dooku said. "None of us are in a state right now to handle dealing with the outside world."

"Jæja, I get that. It's just..." Sören let out a sharp exhale and pinched the bridge of his nose. Then he looked at Dooku, their eyes met, and Sören's eyes were so sad that it made Dooku tear up, desperately wishing there was something, anything he could do to make Sören feel better. Make all three of them feel better. But Dooku couldn't offer false platitudes, false assurances. Sören closed his eyes and then he blinked slowly, eyes brimming again. "It feels so *final.*"

"It's just a week," Dooku said. "We take a week off, to feel, to mourn, and then we try to remember that... that life goes on. We try to get back to normal."

But even as those words came out of his mouth, they felt like lies.

"Life goes on" only works when a part of your soul isn't dead.

Chapter 8

On Monday, October twelfth, Sören felt like he'd been hit by a bus when he woke up. He tried to go back to bed, burrowing under the covers, wanting to shut out the world. But then his phone rang – it was his cousin Ari.

"Ari, hi!" Sören gave a nervous laugh. "How are you?"

"Eh, not so good." Ari made a little noise.

"Oh no. Are you OK?" Sören's heart sank.

"It's just been, you know, a rough few days." Ari exhaled sharply. "I had a panic attack on Friday."

Sören pinched the bridge of his nose. As far as he knew, Ari wasn't anyone from before. On the other hand, Ari was Force-sensitive and had some degree of Force-bondedness with his cousins, so it wasn't outside the realm of possibility that he'd felt the empathic blowback from the Dagorath. "Right around the time Eyjafjallajökull went off?"

"Apparently. You know that's probably going to set off Katla."

"I heard that, yes."

"And if Katla erupts, that'll impact air travel, and that'll impact things like the cost of living, and fewer people may want to spend money on yoga classes.. well, anyway, that's first world problems -"

"No, that's your livelihood, Ari, I can understand being anxious." But of course, they both knew Ari wasn't having anxiety just because of that - and if worse came to worse, Sören had enough of a reserve from Ingwion that he could send his cousin money if necessary.

"Very anxious." Ari gave a little chuckle that Sören could feel had no humor in it. "Feels like an apocalypse is happening."

"Yeah, *no shit.*" Sören made a noise. "Definitely very ominous."

"How are you holding up?"

Sören snorted. "I haven't, ah, been feeling well the last few days. I think Alejandro, Nico and I all, um, came down with something." That was coded where Ari would understand well enough, without Sören being able to get into it over the phone.

"Well, you know, when volcanoes go off, it kicks up a lot of shit into the air. Like... ashes. And dust." Ari chuckled again but Sören could hear a little note of hysteria at the end of it. "Anyway, maybe you could come down to Reykjavik to visit soon? I haven't seen you in awhile."

"Maybe." Sören felt a little apprehensive about traveling, even though Reykjavik wasn't an impossible distance. It was as if the Dagorath happening elsewhere had put them "on notice" here – the question was for what.

"It's a standing offer. Doesn't have to be immediate. Anyway, I miss you.."

"Thank you, I miss you too and would like to see you again."*Of course, that involves me being a functional adult and I've been in pajamas since Friday.*

"At least we might see each other in Toronto to visit Dag for Christmas, right?"

"Right." And then Sören facepalmed. "Oh my god, your birthday's on Thursday. I'm sorry..."

"No, it's OK, I didn't expect you guys to be able to come out for my birthday."

Sören still felt guilty - if he hadn't been so wound up with the feeling of imminent doom and then the vision of the Dagorath he would have at least arranged to buy Ari something and have it shipped out to him. "God. I feel so shitty now. You've always been more of a brother than a cousin, I don't want you to feel like you're not important to me..."

"Sören, it's OK. I seriously didn't call to guilt you about my birthday."

"That's still not an excuse. *I almost forgot your birthday.* And I haven't even gotten you anything... god, Ari, I'm so sorry..."

"Sören, chill. It's OK. Really. This phone call wasn't about my birthday. Besides which, even if you guys had been able to come out, uh... my boyfriend has plans for me, so I'd be pretty scarce." Ari snickered. "Iceland's about to get another volcanic eruption. Two volcanoes, spurting everywhere..."

Sören managed to crack a smile at that and, for the first time in days, produced genuine laughter. "Thanks for sharing."

"See, I can be terrible too."

"Jæja, now I need brain bleach, thanks."

"Now you have something to cry about that isn't, you know, the apocalypse! See, I helped! I was helpful!"

"Jæja, fuck you." Sören laughed again. It felt good. "I should let you go now."

"Yeah, I'm gonna go now. See if I can cause an earthquake that'll help set off that eruption in a few days..."

"Hi Gonna Go Now, See If I Can -"

The phone call ended. Sören laughed again as he stared at the screen on his phone.

Then the laughter quickly turned to tears. Knowing this had even impacted Ari, and right before his birthday... Sören felt guilty again, and he felt even guiltier when he realized he didn't know if they'd be getting together at Christmas, now, depending on if Katla went off and had an effect on air travel...

*If Katla went off because of the cataclysm*you *caused. Great job, you just fuck up everything, don't you? Couldn't finish med school, can't run your art school, the only thing you're able to do is let people down. You ruined your cousin's birthday, Christmas is about to be ruined, you couldn't save Fingolfin or Finarfin, then you destroyed a world...*

Sören growled. *Shut it, we don't know that world was actually destroyed.*

But he had a sick feeling in the pit of his stomach, nonetheless. Hoping that thought was wrong, that it was just paranoia and self-loathing and not the truth. And yet...

Sören threw his phone across the room, hard enough that the battery popped out. "*Fokk þetta kjaftæði. Til helvítis með mér. Helvítis fjandans líf mitt. Til helvítis með öllu. Fjandinn sé heimurinn, fjandinn allir -*"

Dooku walked in and used the Force to pick Sören's phone and battery off the floor, popped the battery back in and closed the back panel of the phone, then came over and handed it to Sören. Then, without saying anything - nothing needed to be said - he put his arms around Sören, pulled Sören close to him, Sören leaning against his chest and stomach, shaking with silent tears.

After holding Sören for a few minutes, Dooku pulled back - his own eyes too bright with unshed tears - and he asked, "Can I do anything to help?"

Sören shrugged. "I just feel so... *useless* right now. Like I'm stuck in this holding pattern. I'm definitely not ready to resume classes - I hate it, I still feel like I'm letting everyone down, I still feel like it's... like the shutdown is somehow final instead of temporary. But I can't get from where I am right now, to going back and facing everyone, everything..." Sören swallowed hard, and rubbed his head, rubbed his beard. "I need. I don't know what I need. Something other than staying in bed all the time."

Dooku nodded. "Little steps." He glanced at Sören, then at the bed. "Well, if you want to get out of bed for awhile, Macalaurë took Huan for a walk, we can do laundry, including the bedding."

Sören and Dooku stripped the bed, and put on fresh linens. They carried the bedding down to the pantry, and then went for the clothes hamper, separating the clothing. The bedding went in the wash first, and Dooku set a timer.

When Maglor came back with Huan, the animals were fed, and Dooku decided the people needed to eat as well. Nobody really had an appetite still but they hadn't eaten much at all since the Dagorath was felt on Friday, and even if their bodies could endure more than the average human, they nonetheless needed fuel. There was some leftover pizza in the fridge, and Dooku rummaged in the fridge and pantry for something to go with it.

"We're going to have to go grocery shopping tomorrow," Dooku said with a frown as he sat between Sören and Maglor.

"That means getting a rental car," Sören said. "I mean, we could just go buy a new jeep right away, but..."

"We'd still need a rental to go for the jeep, unless we took a taxi, and it's the sort of major expenditure that I'd prefer to undertake informed," Dooku said. "Comparing features between models, such as fuel efficiency, safety..."

"Jæja," Sören huffed, feeling a touch bristly. Normally he didn't mind Dooku's tendency to be thorough, his eye for detail - a holdover from his days as a barrister, wanting to carefully examine everything, weigh the evidence - but right now it felt like a slap in the face, one more reminder that Dooku was better at being a functional adult; Sören would have just picked a jeep based on looks and perhaps brand reputation. Sören looked down at his bunny slippers, feeling like a ridiculous, overgrown manchild eating cold pizza in his

pajamas, having to discuss the particulars of replacing a jeep because of an accident that was his fault...

...because of a cataclysm that was my fault...

"Sören, it's fine." Dooku looked into Sören's eyes with concern. "But... let's plan to get the rental tomorrow, go to the store, get the new jeep later in the week. As I told you..." He reached out to rub Sören's shoulder. "Little steps. We don't have to do everything all at once, and indeed, we shan't, because even the smallest thing feels like a dramatic undertaking right now."

Maglor nodded solemnly. Sören *hurt* when he looked at Maglor, saw the pain in his eyes, the pinched look on his face.

"It's still pretty bad for you, isn't it?" Sören asked.

Maglor looked down, and then he gave a small nod. "It's bad enough knowing that Fingolfin and Finarfin died - again. That they were resurrected and reunited with my father just for it to come to this. At the hands of *Morgoth.*" He winced, and Sören felt the unvoiced cry, the way Maglor broke inside all over again thinking about it. "They may not be the ones of this world, the ones I knew..."

"...But yet, across worlds, Finarfin is Finarfin is Finarfin, and Fingolfin is Fingolfin is Fingolfin," Dooku said, his voice raspy with emotion, taking Maglor's hand and squeezing it.

"And Fëanor is Fëanor is Fëanor," Sören said. "I am not him but... he is still me. Each of us, across the multiverse, is like one facet of a larger gem... one piece of a greater whole. Wound one of us and we all bleed. And that affects the bonds we have with each other, as well."

Maglor exhaled sharply. "*Yes.*" Maglor looked up and there was such grief on his face that Sören's tears spilled over, silently, mourning with him. "And I'm very certain that version of me died as well. I can't prove it, but." He looked away again. "The Song went with him. It's still gone. And it's..." He closed his eyes and shuddered, held his stomach as if it ached. "It's an emptiness, that still feels like an unbearable weight. The silence is as loud as a scream."

"Oh, *Maglor.*" Sören's tears were less silent now.

Sören came over to Maglor's side of the couch, got on his knees, lay his head in Maglor's lap, and held him as tightly as he could. Dooku put an arm around Maglor and his other arm went around Sören, petting his curls. The three of them rocked together, crying.

"I feel so *lost*," Maglor said, his voice shaking. "Even when my family died, one by one, eons ago, I made myself keep going. Even when I lost my mortal partners, friends... even you, Sören, I made myself keep going. Kept the Song alive, kept the memory alive. And now..."

"We just get through each day," Dooku said. "Each hour. We still have each other, that's the important thing."

But Sören could tell from the haunted look on Dooku's face - and feeling Dooku's own pain, despite Dooku's best attempts to shield it, it was broadcasting loudly, like glass had shattered and the sound of it was still echoing, the edges sharp, cutting. He was trying to

be strong for them - *Fingolfin the brave, Fingolfin the valiant, to the bitter end,*Sören thought to himself - but Dooku was still a wreck inside, feeling badly shaken from what he'd seen and felt of Fingolfin's death, and knowing the implication of it... that if the strongest part of the whole, the resurrected version of Fingolfin, had fallen, that didn't bode well for the rest of the Fingolfins and Dooku-Fingolfins across the multiverse.

Sören shuddered. *We're going to have to ascend, to pick up the slack, fill that vacuum.* But they weren't ready to throw down the Valar, Sören wasn't ready to face Odin, Sören couldn't even face his students. He wanted to go back to bed, make a cave of blankets, and just *hide*.

And after the laundry was done a couple of hours later - the time passed with not-watching TV, zoning out, only half paying attention to the news of the Eyjafjallajökull eruption and scientists reporting increased activity at Katla - that was exactly what Sören did, taking Dooku and Maglor with him to huddle together.

_

On Tuesday morning, Sören left the house for the first time in days, going on a little walk with Maglor, to take Huan out. They didn't go as far as they sometimes did, just through the neighborhood instead of into nearby downtown and back, but it still felt good to get some fresh air, see the outside world again.

Sören opened the windows for a little while when he got home to get some air circulating in the house, showered and changed into a different set of clothes, grabbing the first clean jeans and T-shirt and long-sleeved shirt he had available without thinking of it. As he got dressed, Sören thought to himself that he should have done this before he went on the walk, but executive function didn't seem to be his strong suit right now. When he was fully dressed and brushed his teeth in the bathroom, it was hard to look at himself in the mirror - he had the same thousand-yard stare in his eyes that he'd seen last when he was newly split from Justin. This was an entirely different set of circumstances, but it still unsettled him, feeling as if he were right back at square one with his mental health, after having been solidly on the road to recovery the last few years.

Sören tried to not dwell on it as he, Maglor, and Dooku sat out front waiting for the taxi. And when they went to the car rental, Sören made himself focus on the jeeps available.

It was decided that the jeep would be put in Sören's name, since Dooku was seventy and some people thought seniors shouldn't be driving and Dooku wasn't about to alert anyone that he was far more than what he seemed, and Maglor produced his own documentations only when absolutely necessary to avoid any scrutiny that could potentially blow his cover. Any of the three of them could drive it, but as it was in Sören's name, the hovering salesperson seemed to expect Sören to be the one to drive it out of the lot.

Sören got as far as a block away before he had to pull over, shaking and hyperventilating, his mind replaying the accident. Even though Sören was normally a careful driver and that accident had been under very specific circumstances, Sören's fight-or-flight response wasn't listening to logic, only the raw emotion of the memory of the accident.

"I can't drive," Sören said.

"I'll drive," Maglor said, patting Sören's shoulder.

Maglor got in the driver's seat, Dooku got in the passenger's seat, and Sören got in back. Sören wanted to crawl in the trunk and hide, the insult of shame being added to the injury of panic and the lingering fallout from the Dagorath. Even though Maglor and Dooku were very nonchalant, not making a big deal out of it, not treating Sören like he had done anything wrong, Sören was angry with himself, hating being this weak and powerless, and he could hear Justin and Einar berating him in his head. *"Fucking crybaby." "BE A MAN!" "Pathetic." "This is why you're nobody, this is why you're nothing, and will never be anything!"*

"I'll try again in a few days," Sören said through grit teeth. "Definitely when we get the new jeep."

"You don't have to push yourself so hard," Maglor said softly. "It's understandable your brain is doing this to you right now -"

"I do have to push myself, and don't you make *fucking* excuses for me, Kanafinwë."

Sören hadn't meant to be so harsh with Maglor - he didn't exactly need that right now - and Sören knew that if the situation were reversed and it were Maglor who was too spooked to drive, Sören would have compassion and not see it as weakness, but know it wasn't as if Maglor had chosen to have this response and it was OK for him to not do something that would cause additional stress. But Sören couldn't allow himself the same kindness and mercy. He was *furious* with himself, feeling like he'd just taken a blow to his pride. It was bad enough that he felt like a wreck inside because of his mental health issues, having attempted suicide in the past, having survived an abusive relationship years ago. He didn't want to be seen as fragile, something to be coddled, pitied. He got tired of *being* fragile.

I am never going to be able to take down Odin and the Valar if I sit here crying like a fucking baby.

Sören attempted to pull himself together as he, Maglor, and Dooku walked through the grocery store. He desperately wanted the normal, mundane, everyday act of grocery shopping to be comforting, grounding, a reminder that they were still alive, life went on for them in this world, that eventually things would get back to their baseline of "normal". And yet, the grocery shopping trip just reinforced for him that something had fundamentally changed, had been broken when the Dagorath hit - at least for now, but there was no way of seeing past that now, a bleak wasteland that seemed endless in its hopelessness.

Sören didn't do much for the rest of the day. He couldn't make art - he wondered if his connection to art was gone much as Maglor's connection to the Song was gone - and he couldn't concentrate enough to read a book. He mindlessly played Stardew Valley and half-watched television, feeling restless and frustrated, yet not restless enough to be able to switch gears mentally. Every now and again he stole glances at Dooku, who was comparing different models of jeeps, a look of intense concentration on his face like he was making a life-or-death decision. It would have been comical to Sören - affectionately, he found it cute - except Sören was reminded of the panic attack in the rental jeep again, and once again felt a wave of shame and anger towards himself for not being able to "get back on the horse he'd fallen off of".

When Dooku and Maglor set to work making dinner in the kitchen, Sören sat outside for awhile, watching the setting sun, hoping the beauty of the fire in the sky would soothe his frazzled nerves and perhaps re-spark his connection to art, to make something out of his pain as he had done many times before. But he just continued to feel the ache like a limb had been severed, like a piece of himself had been cut off.

And he felt very, very tired.

After dinner Sören went with Maglor to walk Huan again, and every step felt leaden; it wasn't long after their return that Sören went to bed, and Dooku and Maglor joined him, just as exhausted as he was.

_

On Wednesday, Dooku, Sören and Maglor spent the day housecleaning - not the most exciting task in the world, but one that needed to be done nonetheless. And though grocery shopping had been an unpleasant reminder of "normal", something that seemed beyond the pale to Sören at the time, the act of cleaning house was as soothing and familiar as Sören had hoped the shopping trip would be. Vacuuming, dusting, mopping the floors, scrubbing countertops and sinks and shower and toilet, cleaning the stove, had never been so welcome in Sören's life. Dooku, sensing the lift in mood somewhat, put on classic rock as they worked, and though Maglor still couldn't hear the Song, he seemed to relax just slightly with music playing.

They were far from being back to where they were before the Dagorath was felt, but it was a start. And after dinner - the biggest meal they'd had in days, a roast chicken with savory herbed vegetables - Sören and Maglor took Huan for a walk downtown, which they hadn't done since before the Dagorath last week. As Sören looked up at the night sky and breathed in the crisp air, his breath steaming, he felt cautiously optimistic.

But only cautiously.

Sören and Maglor came back to Dooku researching jeeps again, and after Sören and Maglor had curled up for a bit binge-watching *Metalocalypse*, Dooku joined them and said, "I think we can go shopping for a new vehicle tomorrow. I'll give Letitia a call to let her know how much money we need, and then maybe we can relax in the hot tub?"

That was what they did after the phone call, sitting outside in the hot tub with wine. The three of them had not made love, together or separately, since before the Dagorath was felt on Friday. And though Sören admired his naked men and that was usually enough to get his libido stirring, all the activity of the day - more than Sören had done in days - had him exhausted, surprisingly so. Sören was used to having more energy since becoming immortal - if anything, an abundance of nervous hyperactivity - and he could not ever remember feeling so drained, not even when he had walking pneumonia years ago had he been this rundown. He felt a bit irritated with himself, wanting to snap out of it so he could offer himself to Dooku and Maglor, to give and take comfort in physical release for awhile, but at least he wasn't alone in his exhaustion, with Dooku and Maglor opting to accompany him to bed to sleep after the soak in the hot tub.

They didn't get to sleep right away, though, and snuggled together, holding each other's hands. And Sören thought that maybe it was a positive sign that he was feeling a touch of frustration with himself for having no libido tonight - like he was starting to care about something again instead of disappearing into the apathy of grief. Again, there was that

feeling of cautious optimism, hoping that tomorrow would be a better day.

Little steps, Dooku's words echoed in his mind.

—

It was Thursday, October fifteenth, Ari's birthday.

Sören started the day with a shower, then went with Maglor to walk Huan into downtown and back. When they were back at the house, Sören called Ari's cell phone. Ari didn't answer and it went to voice mail, which didn't surprise Sören - Ari did say his boyfriend had plans for him that day and was likely occupied - but Sören was a little disappointed anyway. He sang "Happy Birthday" in Icelandic on Ari's voice mail, blowing a raspberry at the end, and then he joined Dooku and Maglor for coffee, where they were going over jeep models one last time before heading out to the car dealership.

Just like the rental had been put in Sören's name, the new jeep was put in Sören's name. Sören noticed that Dooku and Maglor had picked out something that was both similar enough to the old jeep for it to be driven without much re-adjustment, while different enough to the old one - the exterior was cobalt blue instead of black, the interior was a lighter grey than the charcoal grey interior of the previous jeep - that Sören suspected it had been deliberately chosen that way to not re-trigger Sören about the accident.

Sören decided to give it a try in the parking lot, as Dooku took the rental by himself to return it, where Sören and Maglor would pick him up at the rental location. And where Sören had been able to get a block with the rental before having a panic attack and needing to pull over, he couldn't even back out of the parking lot this time, freezing once the ignition turned. He tried to push himself, but he shook and gasped for breath, and when Maglor reached out to comfort him, Sören roared, "Don't you fucking *feel sorry for me!*" and found himself hopping out of the jeep and taking off in a run.

He ran without having an idea of where he was going, just blind panic and rage, and eventually he sat and tried to pull himself together. He was a good distance away from the car dealership, and he thought about calling Maglor to tell him where he was, but then he saw the new jeep coming down the street slowly, and Maglor just pulled over, waiting.

"I'm sorry -"

Maglor grabbed Sören and hugged him tight.

After hugging for a few minutes, rocking each other, both of them trembling against each other as they cried together, they pulled apart, and the look of sadness in Maglor's eyes broke Sören's heart.

"I'm sorry," Sören said again. "You don't need this shit. You don't need shit from me, especially -"

Maglor held up a hand. "Ada. I understand."

"I sure as fuck don't." Sören pinched the bridge of his nose. "I shouldn't be freaking out like this. I never had an issue with driving before."

"We never lived through feeling ourselves die before," Maglor said softly.

Sören cried harder, loud and messy. Maglor pulled him close again, rubbed his nose in Sören's curls, planted a kiss on top of Sören's head. At last Maglor gave him a sweet, gentle kiss - their first kiss since the Dagorath. Sören's breath hitched.

"I want to try again," Sören said.

They switched places. Sören drove for two streets before he had to pull over, gasping for breath, sobbing. He beat the steering wheel, howling with grief and frustration.

"I can't." Sören buried his face in his arms on the steering wheel, crying so hard and loud that he was screaming, keening. "I fucking can't. I can't drive anymore."

"It's OK, Ada."

"No, *it's not fucking okay.* Do you know how *powerless* I feel right now?"

"What I mean is..." Maglor took a deep breath. "Nicolae and I don't judge you for this. We don't pity you - sympathy, yes, but we don't think you're weak or pathetic or any of the lies you've been told, that you still tell yourself. If you *never* drive again, we will still love you. We will still accept you."

"Well..." Sören grit his teeth. "It certainly *feels* like never. Or at least long enough that it might as well be never."

Maglor nodded. He rubbed Sören's back, then Sören's head, petting his curls. "And I know that's rough on you."

"It is. I mean sure, you and Nico can drive, and I can walk to where I need to go in town, take the bus if I have to go anywhere far and you guys can't take me. But that's not the point. I hate being dependent on other people. I hate not being able to do things. And..." Sören looked out the window. "On Fridays, when I'd have art classes but you don't have any music classes, I know you'd drive me but I'd feel like you were going out of your way, *yes, even if you tell me otherwise*, and, and..." Sören shuddered, feeling the tears coming on again. "It's Thursday, and I'd be starting classes again on Monday, and I'm still... not..."

"OK. Sören? When we get back, it's time for you to make another announcement, send another e-mail to your students. This time, tell them the studio is closed for the rest of the month. I'll handle making refunds to the people who need them, who were paid up by the month rather than by the week."

Sören sobbed harder. "This is fucking bullshit."

"You're not recovered enough to do your classes. Truth be told, *I'm* not recovered enough to do mine. That's just the way things are. There's no use beating ourselves up for it."

"You don't get it," Sören said.

He closed his eyes and leaned back in the passenger's seat. His mind flashed back to spring 2018, when he and Dooku were temporarily separated - though Sören didn't know at the time it was temporary - and Margrét won her plagiarism suit against Kylo Ren and gave Sören a windfall to start his life over again. After vowing for years he would never return, Sören went back to Akureyri and it was there that Sören fulfilled his longtime dream of starting an art studio, with affordable and laid-back classes so those who wanted to come try their hand at different artistic mediums could do so. Sören hadn't been

able to complete his internship for med school, having a breakdown after a patient died, where he ended up attempting suicide, and it had grated on him for years afterwards, feeling like a failure, not able to achieve his childhood dream - more like an obsession, a deep-rooted need born on the day his mother died. But after his suicide attempt Sören began to take his lifelong hobby of art more seriously, where it became more than just a hobby, and as he expressed himself through art and found it instrumental to his journey of recovery, he got the idea that if he couldn't be a doctor, this was still a way to help heal others - hearts and souls. He'd had a *purpose*, since starting Logifugl Listaskóli in 2018, and he'd had the studio open for over two years - it had helped reconcile him to the hometown he'd left so bitterly, as well. Akureyri finally felt like home, and falling in love again with the land where he'd first been enchanted by beauty as a child, where it had become his religion, was also deeply healing for him. He had a sense of closure as well as purpose. And he had *pride*, something he'd kept going this long. Something he hadn't quit, like he'd quit medicine.

"I failed med school," Sören said. "Not grades, but putting it into practice, working at a hospital in rural western Iceland, where it was much slower and less high-pressure than it would be someplace like Reykjavik, and I still couldn't *fucking* handle it when I couldn't help people, when people were beyond my help, when people fucking *died*. And now? Now I'm failing at this. Once again, Sören Sigurðsson is enough of a *fucking whack job* that he drops out of doing something because he has a fucking breakdown. My dream of having this art studio, watching people create and express themselves and the way it helps them... all gone up in fucking flames. Poof. Gone. I fail at being an adult, Maglor. I fail at life. I'm almost thirty-six years old and I don't amount to anything, just like Einar said I never would -"

"Sören, *stop.* That's not true at all." Maglor gestured to himself. "I don't exactly work a 'real' job either."

"You had more money than God before I met you. You don't need to work."

"No, but it's been largely because of that pesky detail of having to move around from place to place and have to be careful about what I do, what kind of trail I leave behind. I *would* find something to do with myself - not for the money, but for something to pass the time, which I happen to have a lot of. And that's a big reason why I don't. But for the last year or so, your studio gave me something to do. I got to teach music to other people, which..." Maglor sighed. "Was more fulfilling to me than you may know."

"I think I get it, at least a little. Just... with art, on my end."

Maglor nodded. "And now I can't. Because the Song is gone. But even if the Song returns?" Maglor closed his eyes, and when he opened them, they were full of tears. "I can't handle people right now. I feel too fragile, after everything. And this is after all I've seen and done, and had done to me, in my life. I've lost family. I've lost partners, friends. I was imprisoned, tortured, more than once, different circumstances, different captors, traumatic just the same. I've been in wars, plural. And none of that has broken me. I've made myself keep going. But this..." Maglor's breath came out in a shuddery gasp, as tears slowly slid down his cheeks. "I feel like I'm drowning, Sören."

"Then hang onto me." Sören clung to Maglor, kissing his tears.

"But that means you have to stay afloat too." Maglor gave him a stern look. "And when you get like this... when you hate yourself for being 'weak'..."

"I don't judge you."

"Then you shouldn't judge yourself either. Because a part of you, is in me."

Sören desperately grasped at levity. "Well, not at the moment, but it could be, later."

As soon as the words were out of Sören's mouth, and Maglor's eyes widened, and he started shaking again, Sören had a few seconds of worrying that he'd finally taken his jokes too far, that he'd crossed a line that he wouldn't be able to get back on the right side of. But then he saw that Maglor's tears and trembling came for a different reason now, Maglor turning bright red, and he flashed Sören a grin before his laughter rang out - sincere laughter, his eyes laughing with him - and relief flooded Sören.

"Don't ever change." Maglor kissed the tip of Sören's nose. Then he started the jeep again, and pulled out from the curb, onto the street.

Sören thought they would go straight home after that, but Maglor took a detour, pulling in front of an ice cream parlor. Sören looked at the clock - it was only just after eleven in the morning, not noon yet, and they hadn't eaten breakfast.

"We're having ice cream for breakfast," Maglor explained, "so we can fail at being adults even harder."

Now it was Sören's turn to laugh, and he gave Maglor a little kiss. Or what was meant to be a little kiss, and quickly deepened, heated, their lips parting, tongues meeting, slowly twirling together, teasing, the promise of perhaps more later. When they pulled back they were both breathing harder, and Maglor's silver eyes had darkened, like molten mercury, giving Sören that intense look of lust he was all too familiar with. Sören felt a frisson down his spine, his cock twinging for the first time in days.

But before they could get themselves in too much trouble, Maglor pulled Sören out of the jeep and marched him into the ice cream shop, right up to the counter to look at the different varieties of ice cream and make a decision. Sören ended up going for strawberry ice cream with rainbow sprinkles, while Maglor got a scoop of chocolate and a scoop of coffee. They sat outdoors on a bench, even though it was a chilly October day, and Sören leaned on Maglor, the tension slowly rolling out of his body. After a little while Maglor took Sören's hand and just the simple act was soothing - as well as arousing. Maglor seemed to sense the lust rising in Sören, and glanced over, a naughty look on his face as he took a slow, deliberate lick at his ice cream. As long as they'd been together, Maglor could still make Sören fluttery and flustered, and it happened again now, Sören's face burning as he made an involuntary preening gesture in response to Maglor's teasing - one that made Sören accidentally hit himself in the nose with ice cream.

Maglor laughed, and then he leaned in to lick the ice cream off Sören's nose. As ridiculous as the gesture was, it made Sören hard, wanting to feel that tongue other places. And when their ice cream was finished, Maglor kissed him right there in public, so passionately that it took Sören every ounce of restraint he had to not throw Maglor down on the sidewalk and ride him for the world to see.

Sören and Maglor behaved themselves for the ride home, but as soon as they got back to the house and set foot in the door they began kissing feverishly, undressing each other right there. Sören heard the sink running in the bathroom, and Dooku stepped out into the hall just in time to watch Sören's shirt come off, Maglor running his hands over the exposed flesh.

"Well," Dooku said, a touch of amusement in his voice. "I was wondering where you two

had been -"

Sören grabbed Dooku and kissed him hard. Dooku blinked with surprise and turned beetroot - after nearly three years, that he could still be so downright bashful amused Sören. But then Dooku responded to the kiss with a groan and kissed back with all the passion and fire in him, hungry for not having had sex in close to a week. When Sören and Dooku pulled apart, Dooku only had a few seconds to catch his breath before Maglor kissed him. Watching Maglor and Dooku kiss was always an erotic sight to Sören, and it seemed now moreso than ever, never taking them for granted. Sören's cock twinged and Sören took one of Dooku's hands and guided it to the hard bulge in his jeans.

"This is what you do to me," Sören rasped, starting to kiss Dooku's neck, making Dooku groan into the kiss with Maglor. "And you," Sören said to Maglor, tilting Maglor's face to kiss him again as soon as Maglor and Dooku pulled back.

Sören and Maglor marched Dooku to the bedroom and now they were undressing him too, Dooku chuckling at their urgency, then moaning as their hands slid over him, feeling the need in their touch, that desire to touch, feel, *possess*.

The three fell on the bed together, naked, and Sören shoved Dooku on his back against the pillows. Sören kissed him again, hard and breathless, and then Maglor kissed Dooku, and then Dooku looked up at them with love in his eyes - and sadness - and husked, "Make me feel alive again."

Sören and Maglor happily obliged. They took turns kissing him some more as their hands played over Dooku's body, tracing the sculpted muscles, fingers running through his silver chest hair and the nicely furred arms and thighs. Sören's fingers "accidentally" brushed the bush and he smirked as he felt Dooku's already hard cock jolt, and Sören crinkled his nose and bit his lower lip as his fingers "accidentally" brushed the silken steel of his cock.

After kissing him again and again, Sören and Maglor were hungry for more. They kissed down either side of Dooku's neck, to his shoulders, down to his nipples. Dooku moaned and arched to them as they licked and sucked his nipples at the same time, Sören also moaning as he watched Dooku's cock jolt again, as he felt the pleasure and teasing excitement across their bond. Sören and Maglor feasted until Dooku let out an undignified cry, followed by a shuddery sigh and a little sob of "*Please*." Then they kissed down the center and sides of his chest, tongues licking the chest hair, Sören getting aroused by the feel of it, rubbing his nose in it, arousal deepening as he breathed in the clean, masculine scent of him.

Their kisses trailed lower, to his stomach, hips, and thighs. Sören and Maglor began to use their teeth, nibbling on him between licks and kisses, Sören and Maglor smiling at each other at the way Dooku writhed beneath them, his moans louder, feeling him quiver.

They hovered over his cock, which was leaking precum. Sören's tongue laved the slit, and, making sure Dooku watched him gather precum onto his tongue, Sören kissed Maglor, their tongues playfully, sensually rubbing together between kisses, making a show of sharing the taste of their lover. Now Maglor needed a taste directly, lapping the slit, the head. And then, after another kiss where he shared with Sören, they started to lick the hard, throbbing cock together, from the head down the shaft and back up again, as Dooku clutched at their heads and moaned and sighed, Sören's cock pulsing at the sounds he made, the look on his face as he surrendered to their loving care.

Greedy for him, Sören took Dooku's cock into his mouth as Maglor came up to kiss him, and then Sören groaned around the cock in his mouth, not able to keep from touching

himself as he watched Maglor work over Dooku's body again, hands rubbing and caressing, fingers brushing, Maglor kissing and licking and nibbling him from his neck down to his thighs, paying special attention to the nipples, peaking them even more. Sören took Dooku's cock out of his mouth to whisper, "Oh, *fuck*," stroking himself harder as he watched Maglor sucking the nipples hard, tugging them with his teeth, then rubbing his tongue in slow, lazy circles, before lashing hard and fast, heat in his eyes, making Dooku pant and cry out, trembling, a desperate look on his face.

When Maglor's kisses finally reached their way to Dooku's thighs, he licked and sucked on Dooku's balls as Sören sucked Dooku's cock harder, faster. Just before Dooku could come in his mouth, Sören teasingly let the cock slip and licked it all over, licking slow and then fast, tracing the veins with his tongue, furiously lashing the slit, tongue feather-light on the sensitive frenulum. Sören was dangerously close to coming himself, so incredibly worked up from having watched Maglor worship his body, and now he was worshiping the beautiful cock as Maglor ate at the tightening balls... but even more than his lust for the sights and sounds, it was that feeling of love, of intimacy, of stopping the world to melt together, that was threatening to send Sören off untouched. They had lost one Fingolfin but they would not lose this one. Every kiss, every touch, felt like a protective spell, tethering him to them, where he belonged now and forevermore.

Sören took Dooku's cock in his mouth again and showed mercy, sucking him to a loud, fierce climax. Sören cried out as his mouth was filled to overflowing with the sweet-salty-tart seed, and he grabbed Maglor and kissed him with it before he could swallow it down. As they kissed, Sören stroked Dooku's still-spurting cock, and it shot over their faces, Sören's cock jolting as he was rained on. Then his cock throbbed again as he and Maglor licked the cum from each other's faces and kissed once more, savoring the taste of him.

They came up to take turns kissing Dooku, who lay there dazed with a little smile on his face. Then Maglor and Sören kissed each other, and as they got into it, cocks rubbing together as they kissed, Dooku recovered, hard again, and now it was his turn to grab them and take turns kissing both of them, demanding more.

Sören was rolled back against the pillows and Dooku climbed atop him. Sören clung to him for dear life as Dooku claimed his mouth, and they both groaned as their hard cocks pressed together, moaned as cock rubbed cock, as they kissed and kissed, starving for each other. Laying at their side, Maglor kissed Sören's neck and shoulder, and Dooku's, and then he was kissing down the side of them, making them shiver, kissing each other and grinding together more insistently. Sören cried out as Maglor kissed, licked, and nibbled on a hip, and Dooku gave a growl as Maglor gave him the same treatment.

Maglor got his head in to take both their cocks in his mouth, giving them a sultry look, letting them see the want on his face as he sucked them together. Sören and Dooku pet Maglor, played with his hair, and continued to roll their hips, cock grinding against cock in the silken heat of Maglor's mouth. When they got closer they pulled Maglor's hair, and Maglor sucked harder and faster, devouring them, moaning with his own desire for them, getting himself more and more worked up as he pleasured them together.

When Sören and Dooku felt each other getting closer across their bond, they resumed kissing, moaning into each kiss. And just before they came together they looked into each other's eyes, gasped together. Across their Force bond they mutually spoke:

Come with me.

They cried out as they came together in Maglor's mouth. Never had coming together felt so rewarding, and never had Maglor been hungrier for their seed, drinking them and

swallowing, licking them clean as they throbbed together in ecstasy. Sören and Dooku kissed deeply, and Sören heard himself whisper, "I love you so much, Nico. I love you so much. So much. I love you. I love you..." He felt so utterly consumed by his love for Dooku - the terrifying height and breadth and depth of it, that could destroy him and everything in his path if it were ever lost. He felt like a supernova burning too bright, his fire lit by Fingolfin's star-fire. And yet, there was no cooling down, no relief from this. He enveloped Dooku in that warmth and light now, wanting to show him beyond any shadow of a doubt what he meant to him, the lover of his soul.

Then they turned that passion to Maglor, so needy in his raw grief. Sören and Dooku kissed his mouth, and then began to pleasure Maglor's body the way Sören and Maglor had pleasured Dooku together. Maglor's soft sighs and moans got louder, becoming broken cries as they went up for a second round, from thighs up to his chest, teasing the hard nipples with their tongues before sucking hard, nibbling, laving some more, taking turns kissing him - thumb and fingers playing with a nipple as they kissed - before their mouth was on the nipple again, pebbling Maglor's nipples as hard and swollen as they'd ever been, Sören moaning at how delicious they looked swollen and glistening.

Maglor almost lost control as Dooku sucked him slowly and Sören's tongue rubbed inside of him. And again when Sören sucked his cock - this time harder and faster - and Dooku's tongue worked in him slowly. Sören loved watching him writhe, thrash, howl, sob, and when Maglor cried out, "Please, *please*," it was all Sören could do to not come, cock throbbing urgently.

Before Maglor could climax, Sören and Dooku stopped their teasing and kissed each other. Then they rose up to kiss Maglor - Sören used the Force to grab the lubricant. He poured a generous amount over Maglor's cock, and then Maglor cried out as Dooku worked slick fingers into him, readying him, a knowing look in his eyes.

Sören straddled Maglor's hips and Maglor guided his cock to Sören's opening. Sören sank down - gasping a little at the tight fit, after close to a week without sex - and he and Maglor both cried out when Maglor was all the way in. Maglor's hands slid up and down Sören's body as he began to ride, slowly. "So beautiful," Maglor whispered.

Then Dooku positioned himself behind Sören. Sören gave Maglor a wicked grin as he felt the movement behind him. Maglor cried out again as Dooku pushed into him, and now Dooku's arms wrapped around Sören from behind, kissing and licking his neck and shoulder as Dooku started to thrust into Maglor, matching the same slow, sensual rhythm of Sören's ride.

It didn't stay slow for long, the fire rising in them, needing each other, needing to burn together, feel alive together. Sören bounced away on Maglor's cock, whimpering and sobbing, with Dooku's groans a counterpoint, rocking into Maglor harder and faster. Dooku's hands were more insistent on Sören's flesh, exploring, and when Dooku reached to seize Sören's cock, stroking it in time with their fuck, his free hand tilted Sören's face so they could kiss, and Maglor moaned at the sight of them kissing. Sören rode harder and Dooku thrusted faster, and Maglor's cries of "yes, *yes*" urged them on.

Sören never wanted to stop, losing himself in the sweet rubbing of Maglor's cock inside him, Dooku's hand gripping his aching cock and stroking it just right, Maglor's hands and Dooku's other hand brushing all over his sensitized flesh. But it was too good, and when Sören gave a little whining howl and a cry of, "oh shit oh god oh *fuck* I can't hold back," Maglor breathed "yes Ada, come," and Sören gave in to one of the hardest orgasms of his life, throwing back his head and screaming before Dooku tilted his face to claim his mouth again, drinking his cry just before Maglor's body shook and Sören felt Maglor shoot

into him, and a few seconds later Dooku trembled against him, groaning as he had his own climax.

They took each other's hands, and squeezed. *I love you* rang out across their bond, three threads of light braiding together until they were as one, and Sören heard Maglor sobbing, felt him quivering again, breathing harder.

Sören leaned down and kissed Maglor, and after their tongues did one last slow, sweet dance, Sören kissed his tears. "You all right?" Sören asked, stroking Maglor's face.

Maglor nodded, and smiled through his tears. He took Sören's hand and put it to his heart. "The Song," he said. "I can feel the Song again..." He broke, sobbing harder.

Now Dooku was kissing him as well, kissing both of them. And as powerful as their orgasm had been, the kisses made them crave more. As Dooku and Maglor kissed, Sören kissed his way down and ate Dooku's seed out of Maglor, smiling and laughing against him as he heard Maglor moan, felt Maglor quiver, felt the desperate hands grabbing his curls, Sören's tongue fucking him like he was trying to bring Maglor back to life.

When Maglor was ready, he lay between Sören and Dooku, facing Dooku, a leg hooked around Dooku's waist, Sören holding Maglor tight from behind. Sören groaned as he watched Dooku and Maglor kiss, and Dooku pushed into him again. After a few thrusts Sören pushed in as well, and Maglor gasped and shuddered at the feel of being stretched and filled by both of them, Sören and Dooku moaning and shivering at the feel of their hard cocks rubbing together inside Maglor's channel.

"We've got you, *elskan,*" Sören husked, brushing aside Maglor's hair to kiss his neck, his nape, his shoulder, his upper back. "We love you." He tilted Maglor's face to kiss him. "We won't let you drown."

They made love that way for a long time, a sensual, dreamlike haze that Sören wanted to stay lost in as long as possible, savoring the feel of cock rubbing cock, Maglor's insides kissing their cocks, welcoming them home again and again. And when they sped up, frantic, frenzied, it was like a force of nature, unstoppable, nothing else in the world mattering but their need, their hunger, their passion. Maglor came with a hoarse shout, and Dooku and Sören came together again, cock creaming cock, Sören's orgasm that much better for feeling the heat of Dooku's seed spurt over his cock.

They tangled up together and dozed off, and when they woke they needed more. Sören was held between them now, Maglor laying on his back, Sören's back against Maglor's chest, riding, Dooku watching Maglor's cock going in and out of him, the way Sören's head turned and they kissed, Maglor's hands sliding over Sören's flesh, until Sören made a "come here" gesture. On his knees, Dooku wrapped Sören's legs around his waist, and stuffed Sören full, Sören crying out at the two cocks inside him, almost coming right then from the thought of Dooku's cock rubbing Maglor's inside him.

They fucked hard and furious now, Sören begging "more, more" as they pounded into him, giving Sören all he could take, Sören feeling as sex-crazed as he'd ever felt in his life, wanting so desperately, needing once again to burn, to feel alive, to be in a better place for awhile and take his beloveds there with him, someplace safe and wild all at once. And when Dooku and Maglor's thrusts and caresses sent Sören over the edge, it was glorious. Sören felt like the phoenix inked on his skin, burning up as he had once died, but burning into life, feeling something other than the cold and the dark. Maglor and Dooku coming into him was the balm his soul needed, and he lay there with tears streaming down his face, whispering "thank you... thank you."

Maglor took Sören's hand then, squeezed it, and Sören could faintly hear music - a choir, harp, bells, an ethereal melody that sent gooseflesh coursing over him.

We're going to be OK, Ada. We're going to be all right.

And yet, as Sören dozed off again, he couldn't help thinking that they weren't quite out of the woods yet... that they had taken this leap forward but were about to get shoved a few steps back.

For now, though, he held onto what he had, the flame lit in the dark.

Chapter 9

The day after the threesome, it began to snow in Akureyri. Though the passion had been a welcome respite from everything that had happened, it didn't fix what was broken, and Sören thought it was fitting at a time when he was feeling as cold and numb as he'd ever been.

The next two weeks passed in flurries of snow and a haze of grief; Sören was at a loss as far as what to do with himself after the closure of the studio. He still didn't feel like making art - a part of Sören was wondering if he ever would draw or paint again, this dry spell felt even worse than the one he was in after Maglor left, years ago - and he didn't have enough mental bandwidth to read a book or do something else as involved. As pathetic as Sören felt passing the time watching TV or movies, and playing Stardew Valley, having become a living blanket heap, it was all he could do for awhile, was cuddle with Maglor on the couch zoning out, while Dooku attempted to write in the armchair. Dooku, at least, still seemed to have his own creative muse hanging around, and Dooku was also keeping up his habits like going to the gym. But he wasn't necessarily doing better - more than once, Sören heard him in the bathroom crying, or watched him shed silent tears when Maglor had fallen asleep and he himself was dozing and got stirred awake by Huan or one of the cats.

October wound down, and on the morning of Thursday, October thirtieth, Sören remembered in a sudden panic that he had plants at the art studio, and he hadn't set foot in the studio since the beginning of the month when Maglor had made him come home early from classes.

"Oh god." Sören sobbed on Maglor's shoulder, flooded with guilt that he'd forgotten all about the plants in his fog of depression. "Oh god, those poor plants, they're probably dead -"

"They're not," Maglor said. "I've gone to the studio a few times this month to take care of the plants."

Sören shuddered, not wanting to think of what would have happened if Maglor hadn't checked on them. Then Sören hugged him tight. "Thank you. *Thank you*..."

"But, if it would make you feel better, I can take you to the studio and we can take the plants home."

It was snowing lightly, and Sören watched the snow as they rode out to Logifugl Listaskóli.

Sören knew as soon as Maglor made the suggestion to go to the studio and get the plants that setting foot in the studio after all this time was likely going to be emotional for him. But it was one thing to be aware of that and another thing to be hit by those emotions as they pulled up in front of the office building that Sören had bought and turned into the art studio in spring of 2018. Sören's throat tightened and his eyes welled up just looking at the outside, and every step felt like he was made of lead as he walked towards the entrance.

The inside of the building was so *cold* - not just that it had been sitting with the lights off and no heat running for the better part of a month, but there had been a certain sort of energy flowing through the place that was all but gone now. Sören took deep breaths, the

tears coming slowly, as Maglor turned on the lights and he and Sören started down the hall. Maglor paused to linger, studying each painting. “No matter how many times I've seen your work, it's still magical,” Maglor said in a hushed, reverent tone of voice.

Just even that hurt, as Maglor studied each painting with interest - Sören was still in a dry spell with art, which was one of the hardest things about the mental space he was in. He was always at least somewhat depressed, that was just a way of life for him as long as he could remember, and there were times when that fire inside him that resisted the darkness had shrunk considerably, the depression deeper than usual, and he'd still been able to make things - having that outlet had helped him fight his way back from the edge. This felt like the dry spell he was in after Maglor left except worse. Sören didn't know if inspiration would return. Seeing his art was like adding insult to injury.

The plants were indeed OK, as Maglor had promised, though it was still for the best that they would come home and be cared for more regularly. Sören and Maglor loaded up two of the carts that normally housed art supplies, and they made a couple trips to the jeep. When the plants were all in the jeep, Sören came back in and took a look around to see if there was anything else that needed to be taken care of. He went to the mini-fridge in his office and took out the bottled water and cans of soda he kept in there. "Might as well bring these home and not let them go to waste," he said, and Maglor nodded and carried them out to the jeep.

When Maglor came back, he paused to look at the art again, and Sören was feeling the tears about to come on once more - he'd been distracted enough with getting the plants out to the jeep, but now that was over and he was here with the raw emotion of being inside the longtime dream he'd fulfilled and realizing that even after having taken most of the month off he still wasn't going to be ready to re-open the studio the first week of November... and he didn't know when he was going to be able to do it.

Maglor noticed Sören's distress. "Sören." He put an arm around him. "What is it,*meu querido*?"

Sören gave a shuddery sigh. "I can't open this back up next week. I..." He closed his eyes, and the tears began to fall. "I may have to shut this place down. I can't..." And he broke, sobbing.

Maglor came close and pressed a kiss to Sören's brow. "May I make a suggestion?"

Sören exhaled sharply, and nodded.

Maglor pulled back a little, put his hands on Sören's shoulders, and met his eyes. "This is your studio, so it's your judgement call to make about whether or not you keep it going. But perhaps you might consider an option that's halfway between opening next week and closing forever - like closing for the rest of the year, so you take some more time off to deal with... all of this... but you're giving yourself room to re-evaluate whether or not you want to open in a few months. It would be a shame for you to walk away from something that you loved doing, for good."

"OK." Sören swallowed hard. He couldn't fault the logic of that suggestion, though he questioned how recovered he'd be at the end of December, when it came time to make the decision to re-open in January.

"In the meantime..." Maglor let go of Sören and came around, looking at the paintings again. "Do you think you could take these home, so I can continue to admire them? We've got room in the jeep for it.”

They took Sören's paintings down from the walls, and made a few more trips to the jeep. And finally, when the walls were mostly bare, Sören turned off the lights and locked the door. He lingered at the door for a moment, taking a long look at the outside of the studio, watching the snow fall - feeling his heart sink, his body go leaden once more, the sense that though he was officially only closing for the rest of the year and was going to allow for the possibility of re-opening the studio in January 2021, in reality this was the last time he'd visit the studio and it was done. He tried to smack away that thought as soon as it came, not wanting to be so negative, but the feeling haunted him on the ride back home.

When they got in, Dooku helped them take the plants and the paintings inside. He had a knowing look in his eyes when he saw the paintings had come home with the plants.

"Maglor wanted me to take the paintings home so he can look at them because... I'm shutting the studio down for the rest of the year," Sören explained, "and I'll decide in December if I re-open in January or not."

Dooku nodded. "I see."

Sören thought he rather did - that somehow, Dooku also seemed to know that "if" was, at present, leaning heavily towards Sören saying no to re-opening.

Or something else happening and getting in the way.

That thought sent a chill down Sören's spine, made his hair stand on end. There was a prickle at the back of his neck, a feeling of foreboding - that the Dagorath had impacted this world deeply enough that the aftershocks weren't done yet. Something else was on its way, it was a question of what.

Fuck you, brain. Sören was not in the mood for speculation, worry and paranoia. He had enough angst as it was.

The plants were arranged throughout the house - and indeed it was a nice touch, making the cozy little house look even homier, even more warm and welcoming. It was a touch of comfort, as if to say *life lives here*, a middle finger in the general direction of the death that had come for them in another world. Sören couldn't help smiling a little after he watered them and talked baby talk to them, brushing the rim of each pot with the Living Force tingling in his fingertips, giving them a little touch of loving energy and watching the air shimmer around them for a second. He thought of that garden he'd seen in Blackheath that was well-loved, where he could feel the same sort of energy thrumming there, the unmistakable touch of a Force sensitive. He wondered about that briefly before Dooku put a hand on his shoulder.

"Macalaurë and I are going to the store," Dooku said. "Do you have any preferences for dinner this evening?"

"Lamb?" Sören shrugged. "Maybe your lamb stew? That's nice on a day like today."

"All right. I'll see what I can do." Dooku gave Sören a little kiss and tousled his curls. "Try to stay out of trouble while we're gone." He swatted Sören's ass.

That was easy enough to do - now Sören had to make the announcement to his students that the studio wouldn't be opening up again next week. Sören worked on his laptop to prepare the message for the website and the e-mail, wanting to choose his words carefully - neither wanting to sound alarmist nor give false hope.

When Maglor and Dooku got back, as Dooku started on dinner, before Maglor could go to join him, Sören said, “Hey, can you proofread this for me, to make sure it looks professional?”

Sören had started the open letter to his students with a

Dear 2020,

Fuck you and the horse you rode in on.

Maglor laughed softly. “Well, it's not professional, but it is... you.”

Maglor continued to read the rest of the letter, and Sören leaned on him to take comfort; Maglor rubbed his nose in Sören's curls and kissed the top of his head. After Maglor said it looked fine and Sören sent out the message, he used the Force to put his laptop down on the coffee table and Maglor pulled him close, arms tight around him, rocking him.

"I know that was very difficult," Maglor said.

Sören nodded. He looked up, and into the glowing silver eyes. "That studio was my dream. And now it's gone. I mean... yes, it's not closed forever... yet... but right now everything feels like hopeless bullshit. I feel like such a failure -

Maglor cupped Sören's chin in his hand and gave him a stern look. "*Sören.* You are *not* a failure. You are having a perfectly understandable response to a traumatic event."

"I mean, I wasn't even there, really, but I... Fëanor... destroyed an entire fucking universe. I failed med school... I failed this... and even somewhere where I wasn't a human, where I was close to being a god, *I failed.* I couldn't protect your uncles, couldn't protect that version of you, couldn't protect the rest of my family, I just failed existence itself -"

"*Listen to me.*" Maglor's voice was as sharp as his knives. "The force of Fëanor's rage for his loss of his brothers may have ripped Morgoth apart - which was too powerful for much of anything to withstand - but Morgoth himself pulled that trigger with what he did. *I do not blame you, or any version of my father.* My anger lies with Morgoth... Sauron... Eru himself."

"I shouldn't have said that about Fëanor, at least. I just." Sören sighed again. He looked back up at Maglor, and found words for the awful truth, the center of his grief, like a black hole threatening to devour everything after the supernova of Fëanor's rage-madness. "There was a universe where Fëanor was resurrected and... as powerful as he was, as his family was, if they couldn't defeat Morgoth, if they couldn't survive the Dagorath, what does that say for us, here? For all the rest of the Fëanors and Sörens and Fingolfins and Nicos and Maglors and Finarfins and Whoeverthefucks across the multiverse? That doesn't bode well at all. From where I sit it seems like, even after we threw down the Valar in that world, they still got their last laugh in the end. We were still doomed. We are *damned*, Kanafinwë. We are -"

Maglor held a finger to Sören's lips. Sören could feel the anger building in him, like a rising tide of fire-water. "Enough," Maglor said. "*Enough.*"

"I'm sorry." Sören's jaw trembled again, tears sliding down his face, wishing he hadn't said that aloud, not wanting to cause Maglor more pain...

But the thing was done, and now Maglor winced. Sören wanted to crawl into a hole

somewhere and hide and die. "I'm sorry," Sören babbled. "I'm sorry. I'm sor -"

Maglor kissed him hard, and deep. When they pulled apart, breathing hard, Maglor took Sören's face in his hands.

But instead of initiating sex, Maglor said, "Come, dear one." He rose from the couch, picked Sören up as if he were as light as a feather, and carried him down the hall. "A nap might make you feel better."

Maglor tucked Sören into bed and climb in beside him, spooning him. Sören couldn't fall asleep at first, laying there in tears, and then Maglor pet him and began to hum a lullaby and Sören felt magic in his touch, magic in his voice, soothing him until his mind slowed down and he slipped into the weave of dreams.

–

When Sören woke from his nap, he found a note from Dooku saying he'd gone to the gym. Maglor was doomscrolling news online, looking frustrated. He tried to smile at Sören.

But the pain in Maglor's eyes went straight to Sören's heart. He knew if he went into the living room, went back into blanket heap mode, playing Stardew Valley, it would just depress Maglor even more. *I need to get my shit together for my son's sake.*

“I should do some chores,” Sören said, looking around.

Together they did dishes, with music on for a little motivation with energy - Sören went for his R&B and hip-hop playlist for something upbeat and reasonably angst-free. It was enough of a boost that they did more more housekeeping, changing the catboxes, making the bed, putting in a small load of laundry, dusting and vacuuming.

And then a slower song came on the playlist - "Sooner or Later" by N.E.R.D., Pharrell's band. Sören thought about hitting the skip button for something else, but it seemed like the ideal song for a catharsis with the lingering angst. So he sat down and listened, with Snúður on his lap, and towards the end, the tears came.

Time waits for no one, and it cost for a loss (Damn)
A cosmic joke, should you laugh or cry?

Sooner or later, it all comes crashing down (crashing down)
Crashing down (crashing down)
When everyone's around, I bet
You would've paid up, all your cash down (your cash down)
To not make a sound (to make a sound)
But everyone knows now

It all comes crashing
(Down) It's over, leave it
(Down) It's over, leave it
(Down) It's over, leave it

As the guitar wailed, Sören did too, head in his hands. Maglor pulled him close, rocked

him in time with the storming end of the song, the guitar weeping as the drums crashed like things falling apart. Maglor cried too, and when the song was over they continued to cry.

Then another Pharrell song came on - "Happy" - the same song that had been playing in the jeep as the Dagorath hit. Like a slap in the face.

"Oh, fuck you," Sören said, clicking the off button on the remote for the stereo.

Maglor sat next to him on the couch, and Huan climbed up, licking the tears from Maglor's face then Sören's. Then Huan attempted to lick Snúður's face, with Snúður giving him a filthy look that made Sören and Maglor laugh through their tears, laughing and crying.

Suddenly, there was a knock on the door. Sören and Maglor looked at each other, and then at the door as the knock got louder, more insistent. Sören got up before Maglor did - he picked Snúður up off his lap and handed the cat to Maglor, who held the cat and pet him, with Snúður kneading on Maglor's arm, purring away like he owned him. Sören strode over to the door and opened it a crack. When he saw Flóki on the other side he flung the door open all the way, grabbed Flóki and pulled him inside, hugging him as tight as he could, and started to cry all over again.

Sören and Flóki sat on the couch while Maglor made coffee.

“I assume you know why I'm here,” Flóki said.

Sören nodded. “You felt it.”

“And saw it.” Flóki put a hand on Sören's shoulder, patting gently. “I don't have words for how deeply sorry I am, Sören. I know it must be incredibly difficult for all of you. I would have come sooner but Margrét and Frankie were quite shaken up and I needed to make sure they were OK before I came up here.”

“Where *is* my sister? And Frankie?”

“They'll be coming in a few days. They wanted me to go ahead of time so I could talk with the three of you.”

That sounded very serious.

Dooku came back from the gym a few minutes later and paused by the door, looking self-conscious. “Er. I did not realize we were going to have company...”

“It's fine, Nicolae. It's good you're here, you need to hear what I have to tell you,” Flóki said.

"May I shower and get changed first?" Dooku grimaced at his sweaty gym clothes. "I hate to delay the news, but -”

Flóki nodded. “I'm not going anywhere.”

Dooku got up and walked down the hall. Any other time Sören would be tempted to follow him down and join him in the shower - or perhaps clean the sweat with his tongue and get him sweaty all over again before the shower - but he knew whatever Flóki was about to tell them, was bad.

Dooku didn't take terribly long, but it still felt like an eternity, with an awkward silence as they waited, Sören's anxiety mounting by the minute. At last Dooku came out in a dark

steel-blue sweater and black trousers. He sat on the armchair and Rasputin jumped in his lap. He idly stroked the cat, who purred and kneaded. Snúður and Pumpkin came out as if to say "what about us?" Snúður sat on Sören's lap and Pumpkin came over to sniff Flóki and climb on him, demanding pettings, which Flóki gave with a fond little smile before the sadness returned.

There was another long silence, where Sören could tell Flóki was trying to gather his thoughts. And finally Flóki took a deep breath and gave a nod. "All right," he said. “This is what I know.”

All eyes were on him.

Flóki went on, “You each had a vision of the Dagor Dagorath happening in another universe. One of the universes Freyr and I have seen on Odin's high seat, where Fëanor, his brothers, and Maglor's brothers were all resurrected, and more powerful in their resurrection... like a phoenix burning brighter each time it comes back to life.”

“A universe where you guys said we threw down the Valar,” Sören said.

“Yes.”

“And yet, Morgoth still managed to kill us, in the end. Or... most of us.” Sören scowled. “I think I may have managed the rest.” He blinked back tears, remembering the white-hot rage. “It felt like a nuke going off.”

“It affected my ability to... tune into the Song,” Maglor said, making a vague hand gesture. “It's curious that even though it happened in another universe, we still felt it. We still saw it. And it may have impacted this world beyond that -”

“A fucking volcano went off,” Sören said, “and Katla might blow too, now.”

“There is a saying that some occultists and Pagans have,” Flóki said. *“As above, so below*. It's like... dominoes. If you knock over one, the entire row will fall.”

“Are you saying the Dagorath is imminent here?” Maglor asked.

“The Dagorath is eventual here,” Flóki said. “After all, Fëanor's soul was released from the Halls of Mandos, which was said to only happen at the end of days. But first...” He looked around the room at the three men, concern in his eyes. “Your selves are linked across the multiverse. What happened in the Dagorath out there... was like cutting a head off a hydra. Other versions of you are still alive... but weakened.”

“That also means Morgoth has been weakened?” Sören was trying to be somewhat optimistic, even though he could feel the hysteria rising again.

“Yes, but again... so are you. And you should know the weakness is something my blood-brother may try to take advantage of.” Flóki shrugged. “Or not. He also likes the element of surprise. He may realize that you are expecting him to bring down the Ragnarök now, so he may wait awhile longer, wait till you feel safe again, catch you off-guard. It's hard to say which choice he will make.”

“Wait. The Ragnarök?” Sören realized that if he was sitting here having a conversation with a Norse god in his living room, that meant the Ragnarök wasn't “just made-up bullshit”, as he had been fond of saying about mythology years ago. But it still felt surreal to think of the Ragnarök as real... and as an inevitability. Not just an inevitability, but one he would be directly involved in.

Something he had been prophesied to play a part of. A chill went through him, and the heat was on.

Flóki nodded. “That is the battle where you face him. Where he fears you will destroy him.”

“I...” Sören gestured to himself. “I mean, I can do this...” Sören lifted his coffee cup from the table without touching it, spun it around without touching it, and put it back on the table without touching it. “But that's surely no match for a god?”

“And yet, in another universe, very recently, you killed Melkor... and destroyed the entire universe in the process.” Flóki leaned back in his chair and gave Sören a pointed look.

“Fëanor did that. A resurrected, still-Elven Fëanor -”

“You are still Fëanor. Here.” Flóki put his hand on his heart. “And with Freyr's blood having changed you, you might as well be an Elf, you now have the longevity and constitution of one. So yes, you should not underestimate the sort of power you have.”

“I hope you're not implying that... whatever I did elsewhere justifies what Odin did -” Sören felt ready to spit, thinking of his mother's dead body.

“If I thought that, I would not be here.” Their eyes met, and held.

“And yet,” Maglor said, “you called him your blood-brother.”

“The Eddas say you took an oath,” Sören said. “Ingwion once said, to paraphrase, 'you know as well as I do the canon isn't always true', but that also seems like the sort of detail Snorri wouldn't have just pulled out of his ass.”

“I did take an oath of brotherhood to him, yes,” Flóki said. “Let me ask you a question – if your dog got rabies, you would shoot it, yes? You would not want it to suffer. Odin is that dog.”

“Don't tell me you fucking feel sorry for him. He killed my mother -”

“And yet...” Flóki's voice got quieter, even as Sören could feel the tension rising, crackling like sparks of static electricity. “In 2017, you went from London to Reykjavik to be there when your aunt Kat died. After everything she'd done to you, all of the hell she put you and your siblings and cousin through, you still found enough compassion to see her one last time.”

“It went badly,” Sören said. “And I did it more for Ari, since that's his mother -”

“But a small part of you was hoping that maybe, before she drew her last breath, there would be closure. Again, after everything, you still hoped that somehow, somewhere, there was a shred of decency in her.” Flóki pursed his lips, then furrowed his brow. “I am not asking you to feel sorry for him, I am not asking you to pardon him for what he did to your family, I am not asking you to forget that he wants you dead and he is going to try, sooner or later. But I am telling you that before you judge me as an oath-breaker, you might understand where I am coming from. Odin's path to godhood has driven him mad.”

Sören folded his arms. He still didn't like it.

And Maglor seemed to like it even less. “You are still an oath-breaker,” Maglor said, his silver eyes molten. “While we can certainly appreciate the fact that you say you are trying to help us, that doesn't change the fact that you are breaking an oath. An oath of family.

You must know how seriously I take such oaths. What that sort of oath has cost me. What it cost my brothers -"

"I do," Flóki said. "And I also know you threw your recovered Silmaril into the sea, and your brother cast his into a chasm. If you would judge me for breaking my oath to Odin, you should judge yourself first."

Before Maglor could get up to throttle him, Dooku put his hand up. *Macalaurë*," Dooku warned. Then Dooku himself glared at the god. "Give me a reason why I should not throw you out immediately, Sky-Treader."

Sören noticed Dooku was using a very specific epithet – the lay of Loki cutting Sif's hair, made a deal with dwarves to replace it, and when the dwarves won, Loki escaped with magic shoes that allowed him to run across water and air; Thor had to drag Loki back to Asgard for his punishment.

Flóki seemed to notice it too, and there was a mischievous little twinkle in his green eyes even as his face was otherwise sober. "All I can say for now is that I took my oath to Odin in... very bad circumstances. I did not have much of a choice."

"Perhaps you should explain it to us," Maglor said.

"Perhaps I should... but today is not that day," Flóki said. "I am not the one Odin is trying to kill. At least, not yet. And yes, while I said that you are a credible threat to Odin, nonetheless... you and I both know you are not ready to face him."

"Very well." Dooku looked at Sören, then Maglor. Maglor was about to open his mouth to protest, and Dooku said, "You may stay with us in the guest bedroom for a time, and offer us your aid. I admit I am not comfortable with you turning against your own blood-brother either, but it seems the situation is a bit more complicated than we know – both with passing judgment on you, and the severity of what we are up against, it seems foolish to refuse help offered."

Maglor frowned, but then he gave a small nod. And then he glared at Flóki, and if looks could kill, there would be a crater where the Norse god was sitting now. "Don't give us a reason to regret it."

"I promise I will not give you one single reason to regret it," Flóki said, offering a reassuring little smile.

With everything happening – the uncertainty, the fear - Sören wanted to trust that Flóki was sincere. *I have been an atheist all my life, but I want to believe.*

Chapter 10

Though Flóki had come to give his counsel, he nonetheless kept his distance for the first couple of days of his visit. “You need time to process what you already know,” Flóki explained.

On Monday, November second, things *almost* felt back to normal, except for the "new normal" of the fog of depression that had fallen over Sören, making him unable to draw or paint or even think about art, and not able to do much more than watch TV or play Stardew Valley. But he was for once feeling restless and wanting to get out of the house rather than sit around in a blanket heap. He went out to walk Huan with Maglor, taking a longer walk than usual, stopping to get hot chocolate in Akureyri. After they got back, Sören went out with Dooku to go grocery shopping and run some other errands, like putting petrol in the jeep and paying utility bills.

In the late afternoon, Flóki told Sören, "You must continue your training.”

One of the things that Ingwion had impressed upon Sören before he left over a year ago was that Sören needed to learn how to fight. Sören could hold his own in a barfight, but battling a trained warrior - especially one from an ancient time - was another thing altogether. So Dooku and Maglor had both been teaching Sören how to fight with a sword.

Sören wasn't really in the mood to spar, and it had been over a month since the last time, but Dooku gave him a look that let him know he agreed with the god. Dooku took his fencing rapier down, and Maglor took his own sword and handed it to Sören. Sören felt the power thrum through it - a sword he had made long ago, in his life as Fëanor, a gift for his favorite son. It also, once again, felt ever so slightly wrong in his hands - this was Maglor's sword, Fëanor had made it but had expressly intended it to be for Maglor, right down to the enchantment that had gone into the sword. Sören could use it, and did - though he got the distinct sense that if it had been anyone but him, having been Fëanor once upon a time, the sword would work against them somehow - but it still felt like something borrowed, like he needed to have his own sword, or at the very least, something that wasn't energetically marked so strongly as someone else's.

Now that Sören had gotten back most of his memories as Fëanor, he knew what the Tengwar inscription on the blade said: “Come and take it.” That always gave him a little smile, at least.

He followed Dooku, Maglor and Flóki into the yard. Sören faced off against Maglor, against Dooku, against Flóki. In the fatigue of depression he was beaten easily, and indeed, didn't see the point of this anymore, especially when Flóki was the best fighter out of all of them and Sören felt very outclassed. Sören didn't even try, and threw the matches quickly.

Dooku got up for another round after Flóki beat Sören, and Sören growled, irritated. "I want to go inside now," Sören grumbled.

Dooku took a deep breath. "Forgive me," he said, and then he Force threw Sören. Sören fell hard several feet away in a snowbank - if the snow hadn't broken his fall he likely would have sprained something or at the very least had some nasty bruises to show for it.

"Hey," Sören yelled. "What the *fuck*? Cut me a little slack -"

Dooku clenched his fist and Sören rose two feet into the air. He could feel himself choking. He started to flail in a panic, tried to call out to beg Dooku to stop. Their eyes met, and there was sadness in Dooku's dark eyes.

Across their bond, Sören felt it: the concern that it wasn't just Odin they'd have to face – sooner or later, they'd also face Sauron and Morgoth, and whatever they decided to send their way. Orcs, Balrogs, maybe worse. Sören desperately wanted to hide under his covers again, painfully aware of his own weakness - that if the empowered Fëanor could not protect Fingolfin, Finarfin and the others, how much moreso he could not, as he was; prior to becoming immortal he was asthmatic, and in childhood he had been a runt, a weakling, always picked last for mandatory-participation sports in school, made fun of by his peers.

Now Dooku was trying to goad Sören into putting up more of a fight.*You have to at least try. If we are going to make it, in this world, you need to* try. *Please.*

Sören pushed back with the Force, as hard as he could, until the chokehold broke. And, annoyed that he couldn't just go inside and be done with what he considered a pointless exercise - angry now - Sören used the Force to bring the sword over to him. Sören growled, "Come and get it," as he took the sword and went on the offense, charging.

That was exactly what Dooku wanted, smiling as blade clashed blade.

Sören finally gave Dooku a real fight, and Dooku gave it right back, swords swinging. Every feint that Dooku made raised Sören's anger even hotter, every parry and riposte had Sören gritting his teeth. At last Dooku made a critical slip where Sören's blade touched his stomach - would have disemboweled him if Dooku were an enemy. Dooku said, "Yield," quietly and for a few seconds Sören felt victory.

Then he realized Dooku's misstep had been deliberate, throwing the match so Sören would finally feel like he'd won. And that infuriated him even more.

"*Don't you fucking feel sorry for me*," Sören said, and charged with his sword just as Dooku was retreating.

And, as their swords met once more, Sören sensed across their bond that *that* had been deliberate as well - Dooku knew that throwing the match and letting Sören win would anger him and make him fight all the harder.

"*Fuck you,*" Sören growled through grit teeth.

Dooku gave him a small, predatory smile, eyes twinkling. "Later."

It hurt to be pushed like this, even as Sören knew it was for his own good. He wanted to disappear back into the fog of apathy and hopelessness, and Dooku wasn't exactly the poster child of hope himself at the moment, but he had more hope for the future than Sören did - a hope contingent on, someday, dealing with the threat still shadowing them in this world, their world's version of the Valar, and Odin, and the Sauron and Morgoth at large.

It also hurt to be reminded of a long time ago, when Fëanor would disappear into his forge, absorbing himself in his projects to, increasingly, hide from the sting of scorn real or perceived, and the way Fingolfin would goad him out. They had loved each other so fiercely, and the fighting between them had been part of that ferocious love. Fëanor never loved Fingolfin so well as when he hated him. Sören and Dooku had enjoyed a cozy,

content domestic bliss these last few years - as if they were, on a soul-deep level, making up for lost time, needing a moment of peace after eons of war, togetherness after the rift of the Void. But now some of that old tension had returned in the raw, nasty wound of the Dagorath, Sören feeling angry that Dooku was challenging him like this when he didn't feel ready, wanted more time to rest.

And yet as much as it hurt, it was also strangely comforting. A reminder that indeed, nothing was truly ended - they were still Fëanor and Fingolfin on the inside, and their story was still being written.

Dooku made short work of Sören. Within a few moves, Dooku's blade was against Sören's heart - as before, would have struck the death blow if this were not a mere sparring match.

"You fought well," Dooku said, giving Sören a fencing salute.

"Fuck you," Sören said again.

Sören felt like throwing his sword, but that was no way to treat a relic that Maglor himself had carried into battle.

Come and take it. Sören's fingers traced the Tengwar script etched on the blade. Words that felt like they were from outside of him, like his Higher Self speaking: *If they would come for your life, you must not hand it over to them so easily.*

Sören made a disgruntled noise. Without thinking, just letting his feet and his feelings carry him, he trudged off to the bathroom, and turned on the shower, as hot as he could stand it. He undressed and climbed in, and just leaned against the wall for a moment, his eyes closed, letting the heat of the spray beat down on him, breathing in the steam.

He was aware of a touch in the Force, and then, saw Dooku climbing into the shower with him, naked.

"What are you -"

Dooku seized Sören's wrists and pushed him up against the wall. Sören gasped at the feel of Dooku's hard cock pressed against him, and moaned as Dooku claimed his mouth, kissing him hard, tongues duelling as their swords had a short while ago. Now Sören's cock rose too, sliding against his.

They pulled apart, breathing hard. Dooku let go of his wrists and before Sören could stop himself, his hands were sliding over Dooku's body, trembling at the feel of his defined muscles, the fur on his arms, the chest hair. Dooku trembled at Sören's touch as well, and his hands covered Sören's, guiding them before he took Sören's face in his hands and kissed him again, more gently this time.

"I love you, you know," Dooku said, looking into Sören's eyes.

"Fuck you," Sören said, this time with humor, and now he was the one to initiate the kiss, reaching down to take both their hard cocks into his fist, stroking slowly. Dooku groaned and one hand covered Sören's hand on their cocks, the other pet Sören's face, caressed his chest, fingers teasing a pierced nipple to life. Dooku gave that knowing smile when Sören gasped and shuddered.

Dooku used the Force to bring over Sören's preferred body wash, nonchalant, and then

used the Force to pour it over Sören's chest. His hands lathered Sören, making Sören moan at his caress, breaking out into gooseflesh. The bottle of soap tilted to pour over their cocks, adding extra lubrication that made them both groan at the sweetness of Sören stroking them harder. Then, with a smirk, Dooku removed Sören's hand from their cocks and at the annoyed look Sören gave him, he said, "Well, I need to reach the back of you, don't I?"

Sören rolled his eyes and gave an exaggerated sigh, and when he turned around - letting the spray rinse off the front of him, the spray teasing his aching, throbbing cock - Dooku swatted Sören's ass before he began to lather the back of Sören in slow, lazy circles. When his hands moved lower, cupping and rubbing Sören's ass, Sören cried out, and again when he felt Dooku's hard cock rubbing in the crack of his ass. Sören moaned as Dooku began to kiss and nibble his neck, his shoulder.

"I did what I had to do," Dooku rasped. "I can't lose you again, Fëanáro. I *won't* lose you again."

Sören felt a tight lump in his throat, and his chest tightened, ached. Dooku's arms came around him from behind, holding him, and Sören tilted his face so they could kiss.

Dooku shampooed Sören - massaging the scalp as he did, draining the tension out of Sören's body, making him have to lean against the shower wall to not fall over. Then Sören lathered Dooku slowly, deliberately, wanting to touch, feel, tease. Dooku washed his hair and beard - Sören giggled at the sight of soap bubbles on Dooku's beard - and then as he rinsed off they held each other under the spray, kissing, hard cocks rubbing together once more.

When they left the shower, they kissed all the way to the bed. They used the Force to towel off before they fell on the bed together, kissing, hands roaming, cocks rubbing. They rubbed noses and looked into each other's eyes, and the tenderness in Dooku's dark eyes made Sören ache again.

"I love you too," Sören husked.

"I know." Dooku kissed the tip of his nose. "And I know it's hard for you right now -"

Sören looked down at their cocks and grinned. "I'd say."

Dooku rolled his eyes. "Sören, I'm being serious." And then a muttered, "*bh no*."

"Hi Being Serious -"

Dooku shoved Sören onto his back with a growl, and pinned Sören's wrists again as he had done in the shower as he kissed him. Sören cried out into the kiss, cock jolting against Dooku's, his hole twitching, longing to be filled.

Dooku gave him a look. "I didn't like goading you out there, but we have to..."

"I know." Sören nodded and kissed him. "I just... feel so hopeless. We were *like gods* and we couldn't keep ourselves from -"

"We're going to *try* to make sure that doesn't happen here." Dooku's eyes were fierce. "And if we can't... we're going to give them hell and take them down with us. But I have no intention of going down."

"That's too bad." Sören crinkled his nose and bit his lower lip.

Dooku realized what he'd just said, and facepalmed. Sören's laughter rang out - he surprised himself with how hard he laughed - and he took advantage of his wrists being free to throw his arms around Dooku and kiss him hard, still laughing into the kiss.

"You are *incorrigible*," Dooku rasped, kissing Sören's neck, making him shiver.

"*Takk.*"

"And I love you." Dooku cupped Sören's chin in his hand and looked into his eyes - now there was as much ferocity as there was tenderness in those dark chocolate eyes, sending another shiver through Sören's body, cock twinging. "And I intend on spending eternity with you and your *goddamn terrible* jokes, and your laughter..." He kissed Sören's neck again, and then licked it, smiling at the way Sören cried out and bucked against him. "And your passion." Dooku stroked Sören's face. "I goaded you not just because you need to train, need to be able to fight when it's time to fight... but I needed to feel your *fire*, Fëanáro. It has been so cold -"

Sören kissed him hard, silencing him. Tears burned Sören's eyes. He used the Force to get their lubricant. But before he could pour it over their cocks, Dooku used the Force to push the lubricant bottle down to the bed. "Not yet," he rasped. Then he started to kiss his way down - Sören gasped as Dooku lapped a pierced nipple, and made a guttural noise as Dooku drew the pebbled nub into his mouth, sucking hard. Sören's cock and hole throbbed again, wanting him, and the next few minutes were exquisite torture, Dooku going back and forth between his nipples, fingers and thumb rubbing one as his lips and tongue teased the other, heat in his eyes. Sören shuddered and cried out when Dooku tugged the rings with his teeth before licking harder, faster, and moaned when he slowed down, brushing with feather-light strokes of his tongue, knowing just how to drive Sören crazy.

Dooku kissed down Sören's stomach, down one thigh and up the other. He hovered over Sören's cock, breathing in the scent of him before he took a lick.

"I guess you do have intention of going down." Sören smiled.

"Very much so." With that, Dooku took Sören's cock into his mouth.

He sucked slowly, languidly, making Sören crazier. Sören arched to him, clutched his head, panting, gasping, moaning, his balls tightening desperately as Dooku's mouth worked on him, back and forth. Dooku moaned around Sören's cock and Sören realized he was stroking himself as he sucked. That thought was too delicious for Sören to stand and he begged, "Let me suck you too."

They settled into the sixty-nine position, laying at each other's sides; Dooku sucked more urgently than before and Sören sucked him hungrily, greedy for it. Sören made "mmmmm" noises with his mouth full, as Dooku continued to moan with his mouth full of Sören. Sören cupped and gently rubbed Dooku's balls and then his fingers strayed to that sensitive place between balls and ass, and when a finger slid inside him, Dooku cried out with his mouth full, his cock pulsing in Sören's mouth. Dooku returned the favor, fingering Sören, and Sören let Dooku's cock slip from his mouth to whisper, "oh *fuck* yes," before taking a few teasing licks.

The sweetness around him and inside him, and the lust Sören felt worshiping Dooku's cock, brought Sören close to the edge within a few minutes. Soon Dooku was right there

with him, trembling. Their fingers fucked harder, and though Sören was aching to come, he needed to keep it going just a few minutes more, and took Dooku's cock out of his mouth and replaced the fingers with his tongue, hand stroking Dooku's cock as his tongue played inside him. With a groan Dooku followed suit and Sören cried out into him, not able to help from rocking against his husband's face, fucking himself on Dooku's tongue.

As they felt each other getting ever closer, they resumed sucking and fingering each other again. And when Sören felt himself crossing that point of no return, his free hand took Dooku's and squeezed.

Come with me, Ñolo.

Sören came first, making a whimper around the cock in his mouth as he let go, and a few seconds later he tasted his husband, Dooku shuddering and groaning as he spilled in Sören's mouth. Sören savored and swallowed, and licked him clean until Dooku pulled Sören off his cock, laughing softly. "Too sensitive, dear."

They kissed, sharing the salty-sweet aftertaste of each other, and Sören snuggled against Dooku as he recovered. A few minutes of Sören rubbing Dooku's chest, fingers combing the chest hair and then "accidentally" brushing a nipple, playing with it, and Dooku's cock woke up again. Now Dooku used the Force to pick up the lube, and with Sören on his back, Dooku climbed on top of him, looking into Sören's eyes as he guided his cock to Sören's opening.

Sören held him close and tight, kissing him as Dooku thrust into him slowly, sensually, teasingly. Dooku kissed and licked and nibbled Sören's neck, and began to lap and suckle Sören's nipples again. Sören moaned and sighed, rolling his hips back at Dooku; he shivered as Dooku's hands ran over his smooth skin, felt the love and desire in his touch. Dooku's lips and tongue on Sören's sensitive, hard nipples made Sören writhe, panting, bucking underneath him, trying to get Dooku to fuck him harder, and Dooku grabbed Sören's hips, asserting his control and continuing to fuck him slowly. The slow, sweet rubbing against the magic spot in Sören was almost too delicious to bear, Sören whimpering, trembling, gasping for breath.

At last Sören couldn't take it anymore and gave Dooku a shove, rolling Dooku onto his back. Dooku looked up at him with smug amusement as Sören grabbed Dooku's shoulders and began to ride, hard and fast, frantic, hungry. Dooku swatted Sören's ass and then he grabbed Sören's hips and matched his rhythm, rocking into him. Sören cried out and panted, "yes, yes, *yes*." He screamed when Dooku leaned up to resume kissing his nipples, tugging the rings harder, nibbling on them. He clutched Dooku's head to his chest, cock stiffening and pulsing, the wild rubbing on the sweet spot inside him threatening to bring him off any moment. "Oh fuck," Sören gasped. "Oh fuck, Nico, Ñolo, oh fuck, *fuck*..."

Their eyes met, and then Dooku drew a nipple back into his mouth, sucking hard, as his thumb rubbed the other. Sören could feel Dooku's cock throbbing inside him, the love-lust across their bond, and that made it even better, Sören bucking even harder, desperate in his need, in his *want*.

*I love it when you're like this, Fëanáro,*Dooku spoke into his mind. The hand that was teasing Sören's nipple went up to stroke his face, then his thumb was in Sören's mouth...

Daddy! Pabbi! And like that, Sören climaxed with a fierce howl, shooting over Dooku's chest and stomach. A few thrusts later and Dooku came too, moaning, "Sören. I love you. I love you, sweetheart..."

Sören grabbed Dooku's face and kissed him. Dooku's arms held Sören tight as they continued pulsing together, pleasure shimmering through them again and again, warmth flooding them... burning together. The room seemed to glow, a shining mist surrounding them, like a protective cocoon, their own private sacred space.

"I love you," Sören whispered, and kissed Dooku's forehead, slid his lips down the patrician nose to kiss the tip, and at last kissed his mouth deeply, sweetly.

They held each other and rocked together, basking in the literal afterglow, tears spilling down Sören's cheeks. They had touched something together, some sort of ancient magic between them rediscovered, and Sören wanted to stay in this moment as long as possible. But at last the light faded and they lay there, tangled up together, dozing off together contentedly, holding each other's hands.

Maglor cleared his throat, and Sören's eyes opened to see an amused-looking Maglor standing there, watching them expectantly.

"I hope you're not too spent," Maglor said with a smile.

"Get over here," Sören said, and Dooku laughed. He stopped laughing when Maglor's underwear hit him in the face - Maglor making a dramatic flourish as he undressed. Then he let out a growl as Maglor climbed on the bed, naked, and pulled him into a kiss.

_

At some point late in the evening they had gotten up to eat leftovers, feed the animals, and Maglor and Sören took Huan outside for Huan to do his business. As Sören stood there in the yard and looked up at the night sky, and the full moon, he was reminded of when he was a small child and he and Dag stood in this very yard to say goodnight to the moon and the stars - Dag's fascination with the stars was likely what led to him becoming an astrophysicist. Sören thought about Dag now, under that same sky in Canada.

Miss you, Sören pushed across their bond, over the many miles.

He felt a moment later like he was being hugged, and he smiled.

Then he thought of Finrod's father - where he was right now, what he was doing. If he'd felt the Dagorath, if he was OK.

You should be here with us, Arafinwë. We are stronger together.

And it wasn't just that part of his family he missed. He thought of Ingwion, wherever he was - though they were not truly related, they were still in a sense family. *Blood of my blood.*

_

Tuesday, November third was another day that Sören slept in, necessarily. He had wanted to wake up earlier, since the US was having a rather important election that would affect the rest of the world and he wanted to keep an eye on the news, but his body

needed the rest from the sex last night plus the aggressive sparring. What woke him up, finally, was his phone going off.

He was surprised to see Margrét's number, since she worked nights at the bar and usually wasn't up at this hour, just going to bed about now. “Margrét! What's going on?” His heart skipped a beat, hoping it wasn't something else gone wrong.

“Frankie and I want to come up to Akureyri today. Can one of you pick us up at the airport?”

Maglor nodded – he'd heard everything. “Ma – ah, Alejandro will do it,” Sören said, almost letting the real name slip over the phone, and Letitia had warned them to be careful.

“Great, I'm gonna get a nap first, but we'll be there this afternoon, I'll call when we're in Akureyri.”

Sören had some concern about his sister and best friend flying – they hadn't, as far as Sören knew, accepted Ingwion's offer of immortality, nor had they asked Flóki for his blood, and Sören wondered if they'd still be able to survive something like a plane crash if they had. He tried to push those thoughts away, but he couldn't shake the feeling that something else was going to happen to someone they knew and cared for and it was only a matter of time.

When Margrét called to let them know she was at the airport, Maglor took off in the jeep. The sun was already about to set - Akureyri got less than four hours of sunlight at this time of year. Once Maglor got back, he called out "Looo-seee, I'm ho-ome" in an imitation of Ricky Ricardo. Huan bounded over to him, tail wagging, yipping happily, and then he ran over to Sören with his tail wagging, tongue lolling.

Dooku cleared his throat and looked at the clock. "Is anybody hungry? I could make something -"

"Why don't we go out to dinner somewhere to celebrate?" Sören asked. He quickly added, "Not that everything is, you know, fine and happy..." He winced, thinking of what was lost. "But we're all here and we're OK, and that is worth celebrating, at least."

"I agree," Maglor said, putting his arms around Sören. "We've been grieving, but we need to take some time to remember what we *do* have."

Margrét nodded solemnly. "Wherever you guys want to go, is fine with me," Margrét said.

It wasn't that far of a walk into downtown Akureyri. They took a walk together as sunset faded to twilight, and after browsing a few possibilities and some small discussion, they decided on a bar and grill, and managed to get a large table in back to accommodate all of them.

Over drinks and good food - Sören had a steak, medium rare, with smoked salmon, a baked potato, and a mixture of turnips and greens - things continued to feel like almost-normal-again as Margrét asked what everyone had been up to.

Sören spoke honestly about having to close down the studio, but without getting too maudlin about it, trying to sound optimistic that he would re-open in January once he'd "had some time", even as he still was feeling like the studio was probably done for good. Margrét related colorful tales of her bar patrons and shows she'd played recently with her darkwave band Brjálaður Tíkur. Frankie was an aspiring fashion designer, and showed some of her most recent sketches; she also made chainmail jewelry and accessories for

sale and had photos to show of that as well.

With that, Sören felt a pang. He didn't want to be jealous of Frankie - he was in fact proud of her that she was finally pursuing these creative interests - but it was a sharp reminder of how creatively blocked he was right now. Just like Sören feared the studio was done for good, Sören wondered if he was ever going to be able to make art again. If that had died with one universe's iteration of the Flame Imperishable.

He tried to push that thought away and keep up the appearance of good cheer. The feeling came back that something was going to happen, but now it felt different. Sören's eyes kept glancing over at Flóki.

On the walk back from the restaurant, under the pitch black sky, it began to snow. There were already snowbanks along the sidewalks. Frankie paused, stooped down, and scooped up a handful of snow. Then she packed it into a ball and threw it at Sören.

Sören got her back with a bigger snowball, which attracted Margrét's attention, and now Margrét and Frankie each threw snowballs at Sören. Maglor came to Sören's defense, and the four ended up in an all-out snowball war, with Dooku and Flóki watching from the sidelines in amusement until Sören threw a snowball at Dooku for just standing there and not helping. That led Dooku to join Margrét and Frankie's side. Flóki joined Sören and Maglor's side to balance out the numbers, and Sören gasped when he watched a snowball hit Flóki in the chest and start melting right away. Sören quickly looked around to make sure there weren't passerby who could have seen that.

"We better get home," Sören said, "and then we can contine this in the yard."

That was what they did, though every now and again Frankie and Sören stopped to build a snowball and throw it at each other. In the backyard Sören, Maglor, Frankie, Margrét and Flóki continued the snowball war, while Dooku made hot chocolate in the kitchen and Maglor watched. In the privacy of the backyard, they used the Force to assist in the fight, and when Dooku came out to let them know the hot chocolate was ready he was just in time to watch Sören be pelted with a dozen snowballs at once, at which point he Force threw Frankie and Margrét into a snowbank and returned fire. Frankie threw Sören on top of her, grabbed him and kissed him hard.

Sören couldn't believe it. He'd been holding back feelings for her for some time now, not wanting to make things awkward, even though his partners had noticed and said it was OK, and Margrét was fine with sharing, and they'd discussed it a few times. It seemed that starting something with Frankie had the potential to get complicated, and life was already complicated. But now, something about the Doom hanging over them more clearly than ever, the feeling that the literal end of the world was nigh, Sören seized the opportunity. He found himself kissing her back hungrily - and dropped another snowball onto her head as they kissed.

"Cunt," Frankie said, and a snowball hit Sören's ass.

They came in for hot chocolate. Dooku looked at Sören and he could tell Dooku had thought about lighting a fire in the fireplace to make things feel cozy, but he was having second thoughts about it because the living room was already so warm, warmer than the thermostat was set to. Sören was horny.

Sören was also anxious. That feeling was back, that a bomb was about to drop, and it had nothing to do with kissing Frankie just now.

Flóki looked down into his mug, waiting; Frankie and Margrét gave him an expectant look and Dooku raised an eyebrow, as if he knew without being told that Flóki had some sort of announcement to make. At last Flóki took a deep breath, looked around the room, and said, "I have a bit of a confession to make, and I ask that before any of you react, you hear me out all the way through."

Maglor folded his arms, already looking suspicious. Dooku put down his mug of hot chocolate and steepled his hands in his lap, eyes wary.

Oh god. You guys calm down, Sören spoke to both of them in the Force.

I am *calm.* Maglor squared his jaw. *When someone says they have a "confession", well... that doesn't often bode well.*

And you'd know, Alejandro. Sören sipped his hot chocolate.

That. Was. Different. Maglor shot him a look.

Was it? Sören shot him a look back and sipped more hot chocolate.

“I told you that I would share the story of how I had become blood-brothers with Odin, sometime,” Flóki said.

“Yes, you claimed it was in bad circumstances where you didn't have much choice.” Dooku's brow furrowed. “It would be helpful if you... elaborated on that.”

Flóki looked around the room – at Maglor last, then Sören. Eyes holding. “I took an oath to Odin because I was... sick, when he found me. I had been corrupted into something against my will and he healed me. I did not know, at the time, that it wasn't so much that he had compassion on me and wanted my recovery, as it was to buy my loyalty... my service... use me as a weapon to do his dirty work.”

“When you say you were sick, you mean how, exactly?” Maglor raised an eyebrow.

“Like Ingwion, I used to be an Elf,” Flóki said. “I am Nerdanel's twin brother. I was... rowdy... and sent away at a young age to be fostered.”

Sören's jaw dropped – he felt like an idiot for not realizing it sooner, with the long red hair, but then, a lot of people had red hair.

“You're my uncle?” Maglor's eyes widened.

“Yes.”

“You still did not answer the nature of your illness,” Dooku said. “And as you know, Elves are not very susceptible to illness. Not impervious, but it is not common.”

“No,” Flóki said. “I was captured by Melkor and I was... experimented on. I was changed.”

“Into an Orc?” Maglor looked ready to throttle him again.

“Worse.” Flóki exhaled sharply. “I was turned into a Balrog.”

Sören froze. In his mind's eye he saw, *felt* Fëanor's death so long ago, going up in flames - he'd been having nightmares about burning to death since he was four. He could see the pack of Balrogs, feel the whip wrapped around him, restraining him, burning into his skin...

“I was not myself,” Flóki said. “During that time when I was not myself, I was one of the Balrogs responsible for Fëanor's death, assisting Gothmog -"

Dooku did nothing to restrain Maglor this time as Maglor got up, eyes like silver flames, using the Force to deliver his sword right into his hand.

Chapter 11

As Maglor charged towards Flóki with the sword, Margrét leapt up from the couch and got in his path, standing in front of Flóki, shielding him.

Maglor slowed and came to a stop, facing Margrét.

"Aunt Findis," Maglor growled. "Step aside. I don't want to hurt you, but he must pay for his crimes -"

"I don't want to hurt *you*, either," Margrét said, lifting her chin in defiance. "Go back over there and sit down." Her deep, smoky voice now had a frosty edge to it, her Icelandic accent stronger with emotion. "Now."

They stared at each other, neither of them willing to back down. Sören felt himself tensing even more, heart pounding, ready to spring. Just before he could get up and try to drag Maglor back to his seat, Maglor shoved Margrét aside and took a swing.

Before his sword could connect with Flóki's throat, Maglor flew up two feet in the air and began to choke. Margrét raised her fist, a fierce look on her face, and when she waved her other hand, Maglor's sword flew out of his hands and into hers. Once his sword was in her hands Margrét unclenched her fist and Maglor dropped to the floor, hard, gasping to catch his breath.

Margrét's eyes met Sören's. Sören swallowed hard, feeling a rush of mixed emotions, all conflicting each other. Anger at Flóki for having killed Fëanor , even as Sören understood Flóki felt remorse and was on their side now, trying to help them. Anger at Maglor for attempting to attack a guest in their home, even as Sören understood Maglor was responding out of his own trauma; anger at Dooku for knowing what was about to happen and not restraining him, even as Sören understood that Dooku, too, was traumatized by Fëanor's death and he could only respond a certain way. Anger at Margrét for Force choking Maglor, even as Sören understood that Margrét did what she had to do to keep Maglor from killing Flóki in their living room, which nobody needed to deal with right now.

"Now then," Margrét said, continuing to hold Maglor's sword. "Are you going to sit and calm down, or -"

Maglor got up, and for a brief instant Sören thought Maglor might indeed sit and calm down. But then he charged for Flóki, eyes wild, baring his teeth, and snarled, "Just as well, because killing you with my bare hands will be more satisfying -"

Again Maglor went flying, and started to choke again. Margrét loomed over him, quiet rage on her face - her grey eyes turned orange, like fire. "Don't make me do this, Macalaurë."

"Margrét," Dooku said, raising a hand. "Enough." Dooku sighed. "Macalaurë, tonight is not the time for this."

Maglor gave Dooku a desperate, pleading look, as he continued to choke. Dooku gave a firm shake of his hand and crossed his arms. *No.*

Maglor looked back at Margrét. "Do I have your word that you will not kill him tonight?" Margrét asked, still choking him.

Maglor nodded, choking even harder, his body convulsing.

Margrét let go. Maglor wheezed and heaved, making inhuman noises as air flooded back into his lungs.

Margrét used the Force to hand the sword over to Sören. Sören got up and put Maglor's sword in the hall closet rather than on the sword rack, and then he used the Force to bring over Dooku's sword and his own. He closed the hall closet door and sat back down.

Margrét still stood, her arms folded now. Her eyes returned to their usual grey. When Maglor's breathing was almost normal again, Dooku helped him get up - Maglor was shaking - and Dooku led Maglor to sit back down next to him. He put an arm around Maglor and kissed his brow.

"Right," Margrét said, and headed back towards the couch.

Before she could sit down, Flóki rose to give her a hug. "Thank you," he husked.

Margrét backhanded him, hard. "*Don't.*"

Flóki held his cheek, but otherwise registered no emotion. Before Flóki could respond, Dooku stood up and told him, "I think it's best you leave." When Flóki hesitated, Dooku used the Force to open the front door and he bellowed, "*You.* **Out. *NOW.***"

Sören heard himself blurt out, "Uh, Nico, he doesn't have a car -"

"That's not my problem, and he's a god, he can call a bloody taxi or shapeshift into a bloody horse or whatever the *fuck* he does with his oath-breaking, lying self these days." Dooku used the Force to give Flóki a shove forward. "Go on. *Get out.*" All of the emotion he'd been holding back showed on his face now, brow furrowed, dark eyes murderous.

Flóki took a deep breath, looked back at Margrét and Frankie, and Margrét and Frankie looked at each other, nodded, and Margrét said, "We'll be outside to talk to you in a moment."

Dooku used the Force to collect the empty mugs of hot chocolate and stormed off to the kitchen, grumbling. Sören heard the familiar sounds of Dooku making tea, and when Margrét and Frankie bundled up to go outside, Sören followed Dooku into the kitchen, leaving Maglor alone in the living room.

"What a fucking mess," Sören said as he came in the kitchen.

Dooku leaned against the counter and pinched the bridge of his nose with a deep sigh. "I honestly thought for a moment there, we would have some sort of carnage disaster that we'd have to call Letitia to come clean up."

"No shit." Sören folded his arms. "You weren't exactly helpful in preventing that. When Maglor first went for him -"

"OK, *look.*" Now Dooku's face was murderous again, and now his ire was directed at Sören. Despite himself, Sören felt a frisson down his spine and his cock stirred - Dooku was even sexier to him when he had that look on his face. "Even if I had restrained him that first time, do you think that I could have successfully done so more than a few seconds? I can't blame Macalaurë for his reaction - I rather feel like killing *that* myself -"

"Could we maybe not with calling him 'that' or 'it'?" Sören pursed his lips. "That's dehumanizing - not that he's human, but you get what I mean - and that's gross even with what he did, and it's also close to misgendering, and I think you know how I feel about that, especially with my sister present."

"You know, you're awfully defensive of him considering *he killed you.*"

"I know." Sören nodded. "And I'm... I'm not excusing it. I'm not happy about it either. But for fuck's sake, nobody is helping anything here right now."

"Fine." Dooku took a few deep breaths. "I rather feel like killing *him* myself," Dooku hissed. "But I also did not expect actual death to happen tonight, that there would be an intervention one way or the other. I just didn't know that it would come *so close* to someone being killed. If she hadn't let go when she did -"

"*Yeah.*" Sören sighed. He looked back in the living room. Maglor was sitting with his arms folded, looking down, scowling.. Sören could hear the rise and fall of Flóki, Frankie and Margrét's voices outside - he couldn't quite make out what was being said, but he could also hear them crying. Sören felt sick again.

When tea was ready, Dooku brought the tea service out to the living room. Margrét and Frankie came inside as Dooku was fixing everyone's tea, and wordlessly they took their outerwear and boots off, and went back over to the couch.

"Well?" Dooku raised an eyebrow.

Margrét and Frankie looked at each other, and then Frankie said, "Flóki is going to be checking into the Hotel Akureyri for a bit."

"I see," Dooku said.

"And the two of us are going back to Reykjavik tomorrow," Margrét said.

"Are you guys..." Sören didn't want to say it, the sick feeling intensifying, but he said it anyway. "Breaking up?"

Margrét and Frankie looked at each other again. Margrét took her tea from Dooku with a mumbled "*takk*" and leaned back against the couch. "Not exactly," Margrét said.

"We're re-evaluating," Frankie said.

Margrét nodded. "I can't..." She looked down with a sigh, then looked up with an eyeroll, sipped her tea, and closed her eyes. She looked back at Frankie again, then out at Dooku, Maglor, and Sören. She exhaled sharply. "We still love him. But he killed you - " Her eyes met her brother's.

"I know," Sören said.

"So, right now we need to sit with the information we've just received," Margrét said, "and we need to think about where we're going from here. It's not a decision we can make lightly or immediately. We need time. At least a couple of weeks to think things over. I know you lot are furious with him." Her eyes locked with Maglor's. "I can't blame you for that. I'm not happy with knowing what he did, either. But..."

"Up until this point, everything was fine," Frankie said. "Better than fine. We considered

ourselves married, even though it wasn't legal."

"And that's not the sort of thing you can just cancel right away like that. I *know* you'd beg to differ," Margrét shot at Maglor as she heard him start to protest. "But you don't get to make our decisions for us, Macalaurë. Nobody does, but us. We have to decide whether or not our love for him, and the good things he's done for us, outweighs what he did a long time ago when he was under Melkor's influence."

"I do not envy you that decision," Dooku said.

“And we have to decide if we should allow him to help us with our little Odin problem,” Sören said. “He helped kill me back in the day... he might be my best shot at surviving, now.”

“I don't like that one bit.” Dooku scowled.

“Neither do I.” Sören shrugged. “But we, too, are in difficult circumstances beyond our control. And... I mean, I destroyed a fucking universe after my brothers died in the Dagorath. If there was still anyone else left alive when they got vaporized, I have that blood on my hands. Hell, I have blood on my hands from the ship-burning, all those eons ago. I have my sons' blood on my hands...”

“Enough,” Maglor said. “You did... what you had to do.”

“Well, so did he.” Sören shrugged again. “He said he was turned into a Balrog against his will.” Sören snorted. “We need a lawyer.”

“My barrister days are over,” Dooku said. “And I doubt one of my old colleagues from Lincoln's Inn would want to be called to come mediate for a situation like this.”

“Ehh, maybe we can get a good shark who loves a fight. At least seeing the wig would be an entertaining diversion.” Sören couldn't resist the grasp at levity, but he knew it was probably not the right time for it.

“Fiddling while Rome burns,” Maglor muttered.

“No, not Rome,” Dooku said. “Our entire lives going up in flames, that's all.”

“I have to say...” Sören's eyes locked with Dooku's. “For someone who used to be a criminal defense barrister, you seem awfully quick to condemn him.”

“Because, as you know, I dealt with actual criminals on a regular basis. I fought for the 1 in 100 that was wrongly accused. That does not change the fact that 99 of them were not wrongly accused. I know guilt when I see it. I think you, yourself, are being too quick to trust him and give him the benefit of the doubt. He killed you. How do you know he won't try it again? How do you know he's not in league with Odin all along and just pretending to be our ally? It's the oldest trick in the book.” Dooku glared.

“So is him pretending to be Odin's ally while he helps us,” Sören said. “We're not exactly in a position to refuse his help.”

“This conversation is going nowhere,” Maglor said. “I think it's fucking booze time.”

“Yeah, I feel like getting really, really, really piss drunk right about now, but that would accomplish nothing except giving me a hangover in the morning, and those are shite to fly on," Margrét said.

"So you really are going back tomorrow?" Sören pouted.

Margrét nodded. "I'm afraid so. If we stay in Akureyri an extra day or two we'll be tempted to go to the hotel and try to force things back together prematurely. The only way we can fairly make this decision is with a bit of distance. And time. Like I said, it'll probably be at least a couple weeks before we've reached a verdict. He'll be waiting at the hotel while we decide."

"So he'll be in town," Maglor said, "and not that far."

Margrét gave him a sharp look. "Macalaurë, I am going to say this to you exactly once, so consider it a warning. *Do not* kill or attempt to kill our husband while Frankie and I are down in Reykjavik trying to figure things out. That's taking my choice away from me and I won't appreciate it, and you won't want to deal with me when that choice is taken away. And *that* will negatively impact Sören, one way or another. So I*implore* you, leave him alone. Let him be."

"She's right," Sören said.

Maglor glared at Sören. "*He killed you*. How can you defend -"

"*I'm not,*" Sören said. "What I *am* defending is my connection with my sister. If you kill Flóki, and she kills you, that makes a mess of things and we've already got a fucking mess of things."

"You expect me to just sit here and not avenge my father's death?" Maglor scowled.

"Your father is sitting right here," Sören said, "and I'm not asking you,*I'm telling you,* we have been through *enough*. I am *tired*. I want a fucking *break* for awhile."

"Not to be a dick or overstep my bounds or nothin'," Frankie spoke up, "but Maglor, you might want to consider that since Fëanor was the one who was killed, and Sören is Fëanor reborn, maybe instead of you being all like RAWR ME BE MANLY MAN ME SMASH BALROG ME AVENGE ADAR RAWR hopped up on whatever Elves got for testosterone, you should let Sören make the call of whether he wants to be avenged - if he might want to do it himself, even - or if he would pardon him, or make Flóki owe him some kind of debt, or... I dunno, something."

Maglor glared at Frankie. Frankie glared back. "I ain't scared of you," Frankie told him.

Sören couldn't help snorting at that. *No, she certainly is not,* Sören spoke into Maglor's mind, remembering the way she attacked Justin Roberts with a steel chair, then dragged him down a flight of stairs when he had a foot on her, and proceeded to stomp on him with her steel-toe Doc Martens. That was one of the things he loved about her.

"As much as it pains me to say it," Dooku said, "she's right." Dooku saw Maglor open his mouth to protest and he shook his head. "I am not happy with this information either. Fingolfin *loved* Fëanor, and as you know, the loss of Fëanor led to Fingolfin's own death, facing Morgoth in single combat, when he - I - had nothing left to lose, when the light of my life was gone. But Fëanor is the one who should make that call about Flóki's ultimate fate. Not you, or I, but the one Flóki killed. It doesn't seem fair otherwise."

"And we know that might take some time too," Frankie said.

"But if you decide he needs to die for what happened," Margrét said, looking Sören in the

eye, "for fuck's sake let's get through the holidays first. For Dag's sake. For everyone's sake."

"All right." Sören breathed a heavy sigh. He didn't like being the arbiter of Flóki's fate here, but he also didn't like the thought of Maglor killing him. He still didn't know what to make of his feelings surrounding the issue - there was anger with Flóki for what had been done, what had been *lost*, but he also couldn't help feeling sadness at what Flóki had been through under Morgoth's control, which he could only imagine. And he felt bad for Frankie and his sister, who still loved him. And felt just as bad for Maglor and Dooku, who were still angry about what had happened to Fëanor, and still reeling from the Dagorath, and having Flóki show up and reveal this information was rather like adding insult to injury, even though the truth had to come out somehow someday.

"Let's get through *tonight*," Dooku said, looking very tired and very done. "For everyone's sake."

Sören looked at the clock. It wasn't terribly late, but it felt like later with how dark the winter nights were in Iceland. "Are you two going to stay the night in the guest room, then? I'm guessing you don't want to go to the hotel if he's there -"

"Yeah, we were planning on taking the guest room if that's OK," Frankie said.

"It is," Dooku said. "You're still family, conflicts or not."

"I'm sorry," Sören said to Margrét and Frankie, knowing things were tense and weird.

"You have nothing to apologize for," Margrét said, and patted her brother's head. She turned to Dooku then with a look that said *You, on the other hand...*

"You cannot and *will not* blame me for being angry about Fëanor's death," Dooku said with a furrow of his brow, narrowing his eyes, squaring his shoulders. "You *shan't.*"

"No. And I'm angry too," Sören said, putting a reassuring hand on Dooku's shoulder. "But we are in a war of *worlds*, plural. Our enemies would want to divide and conquer. If you intend to burn a bridge, you must be very, very sure that it is worth it." Sören shrugged again. "I have no fucking idea, myself. I'm trying to exercise a modicum of restraint, instead of, you know, just burning shit to the ground like the old days." Sören sighed. "I may be a slow learner, but I do learn."

—

That night Sören, Maglor and Dooku did not make love. It wasn't so much for fear of disturbing their guests across the hall, as it was that not long after Maglor climbed into bed, he began to cry. Silently, but Sören still felt him trembling, heard the ragged breath, and at last opened his eyes and saw the damp tracks on Maglor's face in the glow of the nightlight.

Sören had Dooku get out of bed, and they re-positioned so Maglor was in the middle rather than Sören. Sören and Dooku held Maglor between them, rocking and petting him. Sören and Dooku looked at each other over Maglor's shoulder and Sören knew Dooku was feeling it too - Maglor was having flashbacks of Fëanor's death at the pack of Balrogs, how Fëanor had died in his arms.

"We know," Sören soothed, stroking Maglor's hair. "We know it hurts."

Maglor clenched his teeth. "Do you?" he seethed. He balled up his fists. *I am so angry right now.* With *everyone.* Everything. I'm angry at you, Sören for not condemning this Flóki to a death sentence immediately. And you, Nicolae, for not helping me *kill him*, when you grieved for Fëanor as much as I did if not more. And Margrét and Frankie for not abandoning him outright. How they could even want to entertain the possibility of staying with him after they learned -"

"Because Margrét has at least a couple years history with him," Sören said, "and emotions don't work like a faucet or a light switch, where you can turn them on or off when they're no longer convenient. They still love him, in spite of what he did. And what he did was a very long time ago -"

"*It still feels like recently enough,*" Maglor snarled, "where I am concerned."

Sören went on. "And he claims he wasn't himself when the thing was done. He was abducted, he was experimented on, changed into a Balrog. That sounds fucking awful. And Odin took advantage of that awfulness to make him swear an oath of loyalty to be set free. That's like people who buy essentials like water and toilet paper during a natural disaster or pandemic and jack up the prices. Flóki was a victim too."

"He still did it."

"He still did it," Sören said.

"You have suffered *so much* in your lifespan as a mortal. All kinds of abuse. Ill-health, when you were asthmatic. None of that would have happened if -"

"Perhaps," Sören said. "On the other hand, look at your life. Being an Elf isn't necessarily a guarantee that one will live a life free of trauma and -"

"No," Maglor said. "But it seems so much worse for humans, somehow. You all are more..." He searched for the right word. "Fragile. Vulnerable."

Sören patted him. "My life has been hell at times, and I won't deny that something very precious and beautiful was lost when each of us died. But I don't hate being human, really. And look, Maglor, if it hadn't been Flóki that killed me, it could have been something else."

"He's right about that," Dooku said. "Fëanor had rather a talent for making enemies, and getting himself in trouble."

"Hell, Fingolfin could have killed me," Sören snickered.

"With sex, maybe." Dooku's lips quirked. "Stabbing you with my other sword..."

"Usually I'm the one to be a pervert, you," Sören said with a mock stern look, but he was tickled by it, and reached with the Force to pinch Dooku's bum. Dooku used the Force to swat Sören's ass.

Maglor sighed.

"I'm not defending him," Sören said, feeling the surge of Maglor's annoyance. "And for

what it's worth, I understand why you feel this way. I want to kill Odin for what he did to my parents. Not even a want to - *I am going to* kill Odin for what he did to my parents, someday. I don't fault you for being angry."

"But you yourself are not angry."

"As I said out there earlier, I actually *am* angry. I'm just shielding it so I don't pour gasoline on the fire where my anger feeds everyone else's, and I'm not giving in to the firestorm of rage and lashing out because we don't really need that right now with everything else going on, and I'm not sure what I'm going to do about Flóki. It's not just me who's being affected by this, or you. I need to weigh the information before I decide one way or the other that he needs to die or he should be pardoned."

Maglor sighed again, and Sören's arms tightened around him. "Please don't be so angry with me," Sören said, giving him a kiss. "Or if you must, well... take it out on my ass."

Maglor rolled his eyes, but he gave a small smile despite himself, and then he started to shake again - this time with laughter instead of tears. "You're incorrigible."

Sören kissed him again. "I love you."

"I love you too." Maglor patted Sören's shoulder and returned the kiss.

"And I'm sorry this is so hard for you. I know that being asked to hold back on avenging me is one of the hardest things you've ever had to do in your life. But it *will* make an already bad situation go from bad to worse - not even 'has the potential to', it *will*. The impulse to avenge me is from that sense of family loyalty, and you *must* keep it in check for that same family loyalty, until I tell you otherwise. Please."

"It's why I don't kill him myself," Dooku said. "It won't undo what's been done, and we will have a whole new mess to clean up with Sören's family."

Maglor said nothing, but leaned on Sören's shoulder. Sören kissed his brow, and Dooku kissed the top of Maglor's head.

"Get some sleep," Sören said.

Maglor's lips quirked. "Usually I say that to you."

"For once I'm being the parent." Sören pushed the Force into his touch as he began to massage Maglor's scalp, and within a few minutes Maglor's eyes were closed and his breathing slowed, and Sören could feel him asleep. Then Sören reached out to take Dooku's hand, and Dooku squeezed his hand and they followed together into sleep.

—

The next day, Wednesday November fourth, Sören woke up early before the rest of the house did, having nightmares of burning to death, which had been plaguing him semi-regularly since he was four years old. This time it felt more vivid, and Sören woke in a cold sweat, and was rattled by the haunted look on his face as he splashed cold water on himself in the bathroom to try to ground out from the terror, shaking, in gooseflesh.

He needed a distraction - there was no way in hell he could go back to bed when he was

like this. He made coffee and turned on the TV at a low volume, where he finally learned of the US election news he'd missed yesterday in the chaos surrounding Flóki's visit. Trump had been elected for a second term, despite being impeached.

Sören facepalmed. *Well, we're all fucked now.*

He watched news footage of prominent American politicians as well as everyday Americans thanking God that Trump had been re-elected. "Humans need some better gods," Sören heard himself say aloud.

He realized then he wasn't alone in the living room - Frankie was there now, looking delicious in a light purple lace camisole and silky dark purple boxer shorts, her red pixie cut messy from sleep. Sören tried to not stare at her tits.

Sören got up to get some coffee for Frankie and she joined him on the couch to watch the news with him. "Oi, what a mess," Frankie said, shaking her head. "Brexit was bad enough, yanno?"

Dooku had been talking about Brexit for most of the year, having held the position of Remain.

"Climate change is going to keep getting worse with this clown in charge of the States," Sören said, gesturing to Trump on the screen. He thought of the funeral held in Iceland in 2019 for the extinct Okjokull glacier, a casualty of climate change, and the other ways climate change had been impacting his country, even when Iceland had been doing much to protect the environment and keep emissions low, it scarcely mattered when big countries were doing damage unchecked. Then Sören had a disturbing thought, the sick feeling from last night revisited all over again but now for a different reason. "Oh god, I wonder if part of why climate change is a problem here is because the gods really are preying on humanity, and trying to break people into worshiping them again. I mean, humans have definitely done a lot, but..."

"Oh god." Frankie buried her face in her hands.

Sören swallowed hard. He hadn't want to upset her. He put an arm around her and pulled her onto his shoulder.

On that note, the news went from talk of Trump to reporting more weird weather and earthquakes, which seemed to have increased at an alarming rate since the beginning of October. Sören and Frankie looked at each other. *The Dagorath,* shot across their Force bond at the same time.

The news then focused on the uptick in violent crime around the world, especially in small, sleepy "it can't happen here" towns. One story was of a homicide in Florida that happened just over a week ago where eight men stabbed a man in his early twenties to death, saying that they'd seen the man "move things without touching them" and they were afraid of him - even though the man was reported by those who knew him as quiet, kept to himself, kind and helpful when he saw people in need; the mob of eight thought they were performing a "community service" and an "exorcism, driving the devil out of our town".

Sören and Frankie looked at each other again. Sören blinked back tears. Frankie took his hand, used the Force to grab the remote, and turned the TV off.

For a few minutes they just held each other. Sören knew logically that they were probably

safe, for now, as they were discrete about Force use, only doing so in the privacy of home, around family. And they had MI6 looking out for them - Letitia had some disparaging commentary for how the States handled "psychics" and non-humans, and Maglor's time in captivity in the 1970s in the US was living proof of that; meanwhile the Brits remembered that "psychics" helped win the war against Hitler in the 1940s, and did what they could to protect them. But Sören still felt a sense of unease anyway, enough that when he and Frankie let go he was shaking again.

"Sören." Frankie smoothed Sören's curls, and kissed his cheek. "We're gonna be OK."

"Are we?" Sören frowned. "Nothing has been OK for almost a month now. The Dagorath happened over in another universe, and here it feels like the end of the fucking world is beginning."

Frankie took Sören's chin in her hand. "Well, if that's the case, we better not waste any time." With that, she grabbed his face in her hands and kissed him hard. Sören moaned as their lips parted and tongues met, swirling, teasing, playing together.

After a few deep, passionate kisses in each other's arms, Sören lay down on the couch and Frankie lay on top of him, kissing harder, hungrier. Sören's hands traced the curves of Frankie's body as she rubbed against him, Sören groaning at the rubbing against his hard cock tenting his pajama bottoms, Frankie breathing harder as she teased herself. When Frankie began to kiss and lick Sören's neck he let out a little cry and Frankie put a finger to his lips, laughing softly. "Shhhhh," she whispered. "People are still tryin' to sleep, you cunt."

Sören swatted Frankie's ass, and Frankie bit his neck, covering Sören's mouth with her hand as he cried out again. Then they kissed some more, and after more hot, fierce kisses they couldn't take it anymore. Frankie rose up to pull off her camisole, and then got off the couch to take off her boxers as Sören shucked his pajama bottoms, freeing his hard cock. Before Frankie's boxers went on the floor, Sören moaned at the wet spot, and he licked his lips at the scent of her arousal, stronger now that no barrier was in the way. Frankie helped Sören take off his T-shirt and then she climbed back on top of him, and now her wet pussy was rubbing against his cock, making both of them moan before they shared another kiss.

They kissed and kissed, and then Frankie started kissing Sören's neck again, her fingers in his mouth to muffle his moans and cries, knowing how sensitive he was. Sören gasped and shuddered as Frankie licked his neck, her tongue trailing to the sweet spot where the neck and shoulder met. He shuddered again, cock jolting as she nibbled that erogenous place, sucked on it.

Then she kissed lower, to Sören's chest, to work on his nipples. Sören's breath hitched and he moaned around the fingers in his mouth as Frankie lapped and suckled, the fingers of her free hand rubbing one in circles as her mouth teased the other. Their eyes met as Frankie tugged on a nipple ring with her teeth, before lashing the nipple harder, faster, suckling hard, shaking her head back and forth as she sucked. "Fuck, yeah," she panted as she pulled back to look at Sören's nipple swollen, glistening, and lashed her tongue some more, making Sören arch to her, rubbing against her more insistently. Frankie pressed harder against him, moaning with her lips around the other nipple as her clit made contact with his frenulum.

Frankie went back and forth between Sören's nipples and at last Sören rasped, "Your turn, *elskan.*" With a wicked grin Frankie leaned up and her full breasts were in Sören's face. Sören suckled one pierced nipple and Frankie pet his curls, breathing harder, letting out a

sigh as he sucked. Then she moaned as his tongue lapped, moaning again as his tongue traced circles around the aerole before rubbing on her nipple again. Sören's cock got harder as he feasted on Frankie's breasts, and he could feel her juices dripping onto his cock, the hard nub of her clit grinding on him. "God, I want you," Sören whispered as he kissed between her breasts, over her heart, taking a moment to cup her breasts, tease her nipples with his thumbs, rubbing then pinching, pulling, before he drew a nipple into his mouth again.

When Frankie had her fill she claimed Sören's mouth, and then she guided her breasts to his chest and they watched as their swollen, hard, slick nipples rubbed together. "Oh, *god,*" Sören breathed, cock twinging. It was all he could do to not take her right then.

"Mmmmmmm," Frankie moaned, cupping one of her breasts and working her nipple against Sören's, rubbing it hard and fast, fucking it. Sören cried out and Frankie laughed and covered his mouth with her free hand. Then she leaned in to steal a kiss before doing the same with her other breast.

"You are driving me out of my fucking mind," Sören growled.

Frankie grinned. "Good. Give you something better to think about, right?"

They kissed again, and then they licked their tongues together and Sören groaned, dying to taste her. Frankie clearly wanted that too - a moment later she rose, and scooted up the length of Sören's body to sit on his shoulders. Sören rubbed his nose in her red bush, savoring the scent of her before he took his first lick.

She was so wet, and Sören sipped at the sweet musk of her, making filthy, obscene slurping noises as he kissed her pussy lips. Frankie moaned and grabbed his head, and she began tugging on his curls as his tongue brushed around her clit, teasing and teasing before his tongue at last slid over the hard little button, going slow. When she started riding his face, fucking herself on his tongue, that was his cue to lick faster, his tongue fucking her clit harder and harder, and then as she got closer he sucked on it. She rode his face again, trying to hold back her cries, panting and whimpering, her body trembling. Sören groaned at her juices dripping, her thighs shaking, and started slurping again as he sucked, drinking her. Frankie lost control a minute later, throwing back her head and letting out a shuddery gasp. Sören felt her jolt in his mouth and he pulled back to watch her beautiful flower contracting, gushing cream, her mound quivering.

He needed more, and so did she. He ate her and ate her, starting with that slow, feather-light teasing around then on her clit, then rubbing harder, at last furiously, viciously devouring her, sucking her nub to shivering, pulsing climax. She came another three times from his tongue before she said, "Break time," catching her breath. Sören's cock was almost painfully hard, his balls tense and aching, wanting to explode.

Frankie slid down, and Sören thought she'd slide all the way down to his hips to straddle his cock, and instead she paused over his chest. Sören watched as she pulled her clitoral hood back, exposing the luscious, glistening jewel, and he gasped as she sank down and pressed her clit to his hard, pebbled nipple. She began to rub, teasing his nipple as she pleasured herself. The sensation of her clit rubbing his nipple was almost too much to bear, and the sight of her clit on his nipple drove him wild. "*Fuck*, that's fucking *hot,*" Sören gasped, and Frankie gave a throaty "mmmmmmm" in response.

When she got closer, she rubbed harder, and the sight of her clit fucking his nipple, her juices slicking his nipple, making streamers, was enough to almost bring Sören off. He ran his hands over her, played with her own nipples, and after a few minutes Frankie

came, squirting onto his nipple then an arc shot over Sören's face. He licked his lips, tasting her juices again, his cock throbbing desperately.

Frankie took a moment to recover, breathing hard, gasping, and then she leaned in to kiss him, tasting herself on his lips, and moved her head down to lick her juices from his nipple. Sören panted and writhed underneath her, begging, "oh god, Frankie, please."

She relented and slid further down and Sören guided the tip of his cock to her. They both moaned as she sank down, and when he was all the way in, Frankie's hands rested on his heart.

"I love you," she said, looking into his eyes.

"I love you, *elskan.*" Sören reached up to stroke her face, feeling an ache at just how much he loved her - how long he'd loved her and not fully realized it, not letting himself potentially face rejection. They definitely had a lot of lost time to make up for, both now and eons ago, when Fëanor and Lalwen had been lovers, not able to resist that Finwion fire in each other.

Frankie rode him hard, and despite their efforts to keep the noise down with their moaning, the wet suctioning sound of Sören's cock gliding in and out of her, the slap of his balls against her, was impossible to keep down. They panted together, not able to help little moans as their eyes met and they could see the passion in each other's eyes. Their hands roamed over each other's bodies, Sören worshiping her lush, thick curves, the softness of her. "So beautiful," Sören whispered. His fingers dipped to the flower of her pussy, began to rub the clit the way she liked it. "So fucking sexy."

As Sören's fingers worked her clit Frankie rode him harder, bucking wildly, and at last she grabbed his shoulders, nails digging in him and she rasped, "oh god oh god oh god right there *rightthererightttheredon'tyoufuckingstop*." Sören braced himself, his own pleasure starting to surge at the delicious thought of her orgasm. And when she climaxed, pulsing around him, Sören came too, not able to help the cry as he spent into her, finally feeling deep, blissful relief.

They snuggled together, giggling through the euphoria of their orgasm. After they lay there for awhile and Sören felt himself dozing off, he was woken up by fabric hitting him in the face. He blinked open and saw Frankie had used the Force to throw her boxers at him. She got up now to put her camisole back on.

"I gotta go wake up Margrét so we can fly back to Reykjavik."

Sören pouted. "So you really can't stay -"

"She has a bar to run and we. Yanno. Need to think about the thing with Flóki at a distance." Frankie put her boxers on.

"OK."

As Frankie woke up Margrét, Dooku and Maglor finally made it out of bed. After coffee, Dooku was the one to bring them to the airport, with Sören going along for the ride.

When they came back the rest of the day passed in a blur - the depression settled back over Sören, in a blanket heap. He, Maglor and Dooku called it an early night - he could tell Maglor and Dooku were feeling the same sort of emotional hangover from last night.

–

On Thursday, November fifth, Sören once again watched the news, with Maglor and Dooku in the room. There was a press conference with Trump where he was taking questions from select members of the audience, one of whom now asked, "Mr. President, surely you have heard by now the reports of there being a small number of people in our country and other parts of the world, exhibiting abilities such as telekinesis. Even a minute fraction of the population is enough to create a huge threat to public safety, possibly even national security, enough to cause an international incident with our enemies. What do you plan on doing about this?"

"We'll look into it," was all Trump said.

Sören's jaw dropped. He looked at Maglor, then Dooku. Dooku turned off the TV and scowled into his tea.

"Well," Maglor said, "before we panic too much, there's still a consensus that everyone reporting witnessing this sort of thing is a crackpot."

"It's still ominous," Dooku said. "I had fears decades ago that there would eventually be an organized witch hunt against people like us."

"'Look into it' isn't necessarily a witch hunt," Sören said, desperately wanting to believe that they'd still be safe at least a little while longer.

"It doesn't mean nothing will be done, either," Dooku said. "Especially when the religious right helped get that man elected, and the people who by and large seem to be having the most extreme reactions - the ones leading mobs to beat and kill Force sensitives - are religious people."

"Fuck," Sören said.

"Fuck, indeed." Dooku used the Force to pour himself some more tea.

"Well..." Maglor looked at the clock. "We've had enough stress lately. May I propose that we go somewhere and do something for awhile? Just... not think about things?"

They ended up driving to a hilly area, climbing up the hill with a sled and an inner tube, and as Dooku watched, Sören and Maglor went down on the sled, then once they came up Sören shoved Dooku onto the sled with him as Maglor watched, and then Dooku and Maglor went down on the sled as Sören went down in the inner tube, laughing and screaming all the way.

After a few more trips it was starting to get dark. They decided to have dinner out - a treat to themselves and a way to further decompress from everything - going to Serrano, a Mexican restaurant and an old favorite of theirs. Sören had a large chicken burrito with rice and beans, and felt reasonably content on the drive back home.

At home the three of them cuddled together in the hot tub, drinking wine. The change of pace had definitely done them some good and now there was an air of playful sensuality, the three taking turns kissing each other, hands roaming and exploring in the tub. When they got out, they made their way to the bed, and Maglor got out the vanilla-flavored massage oil they kept in the bedtable. Dooku and Sören worked on Maglor together,

rubbing the back of him then the front of him, kneading the tension out of his body. Then, once Maglor was thoroughly coated in the oil, glistening, Sören and Dooku proceeded to lick him all over, until Maglor was writhing, gasping, begging for release. Sören took Maglor's cock into his mouth, sucking slowly, as Dooku licked Maglor's balls, lapped slowly inside him, making Maglor even crazier. Then they switched, with Dooku sucking Maglor as Sören's tongue played inside him, rubbing the sweet spot, Sören not able to keep from stroking himself to the sound of Maglor's cries. They teased him and teased him, keeping him on that edge just short of orgasm, as long as they could. But at last, when they switched again, Maglor came in Sören's mouth, and Maglor shot off another arc of cum as Sören kissed Dooku, sharing Maglor's seed in the kiss.

It was Dooku's turn next. Sören and Maglor rubbed him down back and front - Maglor's cock hardened up again as his hands played over Dooku's body, gliding over the sculpted, toned muscles, fingers rubbing the silver fur. They licked him all over, making Dooku pant and moan, and then Sören sucked him while Maglor's tongue fucked inside him. When Maglor sucked him and Sören's tongue lashed away in the channel, Dooku lost control, coming with a hoarse shout. Maglor kissed Sören and the taste of their lover brought Sören dangerously close to his own climax.

Sören was last for the massage. He was so pent up from making love to their bodies that he came just from Dooku and Maglor's hands rubbing from his spine down to his ass and back up. They still continued to work him over, Sören hardening again as they did the front of him, and when they began to lick him together Sören made inhuman noises, cock aching to come again. Dooku sucked as Maglor tongue-fucked him, and Sören rocked his hips, fucking himself on their mouths, cries getting louder and louder until he exploded in Dooku's mouth, so much that his seed spilled from the corners, and watching Maglor lick Dooku clean after they shared the seed in a kiss set Sören off again, coming hard.

They still weren't done. Sören and Dooku held Maglor between them, Dooku holding Maglor from behind, arms around him as one of Maglor's legs draped over Sören's hips. Sören and Dooku took him together, and the feel of Dooku's cock rubbing against his cock in the slick heat of Maglor was so luscious that Sören fought to hold back his orgasm, even as much as he'd come already. Sören rocked Maglor, kissed him, stroked his hair, looked lovingly into those molten silver eyes. "Ada's here," Sören whispered between kisses, knowing how much Maglor needed the assurance right now. "Ada's here. Uncle's here. We've got you. We're not going anywhere. Our love for each other was stronger than everything they threw at us, we're together again."

Maglor clung to Sören, shuddering, kissing him fiercely, hungrily. "Ada," he moaned. "Ada... Uncle... yes... *yes*, yes..."

"That's a good boy," Dooku whispered, kissing Maglor's neck. "Our brave, beautiful boy."

Maglor came hard, and Sören and Dooku came seconds later, the three taking each other's hands as they climaxed. It was that climax that shattered them, slaking their thirst for now. They tangled up together, safe and warm, everything all right for at least a little while.

Chapter 12

On Wednesday, November eleventh, after Sören had time to sit with the information about Flóki, he was still undecided. However, what he was sure of was that if he had a meeting with Flóki – alone, without the empathic blowback of Maglor and Dooku's grief and anger feeding his own emotions, he would be better able to make a decision.

Sören also felt it was better to not tell Maglor and Dooku about this visit ahead of time, because he didn't want them to try to talk Sören out of meeting with the god alone, or, worse, insisting that he not be alone and that they be present. Sören understood there was a danger in being alone with Flóki – that if Flóki was in fact lying about his allegiance, being alone with him meant the potential for Flóki to summon Odin to finish him off... or perhaps for Flóki to do it himself to fulfill the oath.

But then, Flóki and Ingwion seemed to have an understanding between them, and Sören doubted very much that Ingwion would have offered his blood to make Sören and Dooku immortal just to fuck them over – and there had been provable physiological changes, such as speed healing from wounds, Sören no longer having asthma and Dooku no longer having arthritis.

Sören thought about how he would get some alone time with Flóki without arousing too much suspicion. He could meet Flóki at the hotel, but he thought it might be safer for Flóki to meet him at home. After giving it some thought, Sören finally asked Maglor and Dooku, “You guys mind going out to dinner tonight? I'll treat from my account.”

“Where would you like to go, sweetheart?” Dooku asked. “And I don't mind paying.”

Sören cocked his head to one side. “I was actually thinking you and Maglor should go out by yourselves tonight. We need to start... trying to get back to normal. The three of us have been chained at the hip for the last month or so and it's good for us to do things in pairs as well as the three of us together. I might paint, or something.” The “might” was worded deliberately, to make it a half-truth rather than a blatant lie – Sören really wanted to try, but the real purpose of the evening was to meet with Flóki. He hoped they would understand later.

Maglor and Dooku looked at each other and then Maglor nodded and said, “All right. But then that also means I get to take you out soon, and Nicolae gets to take you out sometime -”

“Jæja. Just... have fun. We need... to have fun again.” That, too, was not really a lie, even though Sören wasn't feeling especially fun himself these days.

Shortly after Maglor and Dooku left for their date, Sören dialed Flóki's cell number. It felt absolutely surreal, calling a god on a cell phone, and when Flóki answered, Sören was chuckling to himself.

“It's good to hear you laugh,” Flóki said. “Unless you're laughing because you decided you're going to kill me.”

“I haven't decided either way yet. Actually, that's what I'm asking about. Ah, Alejandro and Nico are out getting a bite to eat. Do you want to come over and we can discuss things?”

“Sure, do you want me to grab takeout on my way over?”

“Yes, please. I'm not picky.” Sören hadn't had much of an appetite for food since the

Dagorath.

The only thing more surreal than calling a Norse god on a cell phone was having one show up at one's house with a box of pizza. Sören couldn't help but laugh again when Flóki walked through the door with the pizza box.

“I didn't know what to get you so I went with what your sister usually likes – sausage, mushroom, peppers, black olives and pepperoni.”

“That's good with me,” Sören said.

“I assume you want to eat first, before we get down to serious business?”

“If you don't mind,” Sören said.

A few bites into his pizza, Sören once again realized he'd given Flóki a very big opportunity to kill him, if the food was poisoned. Seeming to pick up on Sören's concern as he paused eating, Flóki also paused eating, took a deep breath and said, “Sören, look. While I would advise you to exercise caution with anyone outside your partners and blood family, which would mean even me, you should also know that if I wanted to kill you, I would have already done so. It's not like it would be particularly hard.”

Sören scowled, but he resumed eating.

When they were finished, there was leftovers, and Flóki said, “Go ahead and keep what's left.” Sören got up to put the remaining pizza in the fridge and when he came back, he had a frosty cold beer for each of them.

“Mind if I put my feet up?” Flóki asked.

“No, you are a guest.” A relaxed posture was also less threatening, implying Flóki really was here to talk and not to harm him.

After a moment of quietly drinking beer, Flóki said, “If there's anything else you want to ask me...”

Sören realized he could ask for information on Odin, but he also didn't know what would be the best questions, strategically. He also knew that even if he got an honest, straightforward answer about Odin's plans and activities, Odin could still be using that as a form of subterfuge, even to Flóki himself.

So instead Sören said, “If there's anything else you think will help your case...”

“There isn't much that I haven't already said. I was taken prisoner, experimented – tortured – and, I guess you could call it programmed, to do horrible things while under Morgoth's influence. Odin fought me during his take-on-the-giants tour, and decided to heal me and make me swear to him, and I found out later it was because he thought I could be useful. He still finds me useful, which is why I myself am not dead. I probably have what people these days call Stockholm Syndrome, a part of me that remains grateful for setting me free... but that means I want to see him put out of his misery. The rabid dog analogy is apt. He got his start fighting monsters... he has become one.” Flóki shrugged. “I have a debt to you. I took your life. I'd like to help give it back.”

Sören found himself bristling slightly at the choice of words. He remembered what Dooku's late mentor Yodha had told him about the gods – they were not benevolent, they preyed on people, and it seemed that even with the offer to help, this was a typical deity attitude – the god Loki acting like Sören's life was some sort of snack to dispense from a

machine. *I already have a life. It's not yours to give.*

But he held his tongue. He also knew that perhaps Flóki meant well and he was reading too much into those words.

And then Flóki continued, as if he sensed the discomfort and was trying to clarify his words and intent. “I know how devastating the Dagorath has been for you... to feel yourself die in another universe. To feel the chain reaction across the multiverse... to feel vulnerable. It's been a month since the Dagorath and you're still affected by it. Still feeling like a part of you has died, because a part of you did, all the yous facets of a brilliant diamond. It's not the sort of thing one can get over instantaneously. But it also hurts me to see you like this."

Sören exhaled sharply. His face burned. He'd already been feeling a considerable amount of shame about being reduced to this - huddling under blankets, not functional enough to do much other than watch TV or play Stardew Valley. And it had created a vicious cycle, where the shame he felt over his avoidance of people, places and things made him want to avoid and shut down even more.

"Please, please understand I am not trying to embarass you," Flóki said, reaching out to take Sören's hand, seeming to feel the hot surge of shame in him. "I know that depression is not a choice, and I know that your reaction to all of this is rather the result of a trauma pile-up."

"That sounds about right," Sören said. "It would have been bad enough on its own. It's worse because..." Sören winced, not wanting to think about his past, and there it was anyway - never far away. "I've already been through so much shit . Losing my mamma just shy of my sixth birthday - you know we're coming up on the thirty-year anniversary of her death soon? And my miserable fucking childhood with my aunt and uncle, getting bullied in school. The feeling of utter fucking failure when I couldn't handle my internship at the hospital. Losing Maglor and spending that time wondering if he'd really married some woman to 'appease his Catholic family' or if he'd just gotten bored with me and left. All the shit with Justin. Then Nico leaving, for awhile, claiming 'irreconcilable differences' - I didn't know for months it was because he thought he was too old and didn't think he was being fair to me..." Sören shook his head. "I'm tired . I'm going to be thirty-six in two weeks and I feel fucking old. I had finally gotten some happiness in my life, where things were stable and good for awhile, and then everything fell apart when the Dagorath happened. And now I have the reminder that not even godlike versions of us could save themselves from destruction, so if I ascend to take on the gods that have me on their shit list - which seems like a tall order at the moment, more than I'm capable of, I can't even drive a car right now - that still doesn't guarantee that I won't keep going through fucking bullshit ..."

"Yes. Like I said... a trauma pile-up. Shutting down is an understandable reaction. I don't expect you to be over everything or push yourself to do things you're not able to do yet. And yet..." Flóki took a deep breath. He took Sören's chin in his hand and met his eyes. "What I'm trying to get at is... I miss seeing you do your art."

"Oh." And for some reason, that hurt even more than suggesting he try to drive again, or re-open his studio, or find something to do with himself during the day other than zone out to TV and his game. "Oh." Sören's jaw trembled, tears in his eyes again. "Well, I can't." Sören swallowed hard, feeling the deepest level of shame yet, fighting the urge to run away, run off into the night and hide somewhere. "I can't make art anymore. It's like... when the Fëanor in that one universe died, the vision in me died.”

“The part of you that makes art isn't dead.”

"I got like this after Maglor left," Sören choked out. "I couldn't make art for over a year."

"But eventually, you did make art again."

"I did." Sören nodded. "But this feels different."

"I doubt highly that you are permanently unable to make art. I believe, very strongly, that part of you is still there. And I think if you try to bring that part of you back online, it may help bring you back from the edge, at least a little."

Sören closed his eyes. He shook his head. "I feel like it's dead."

" Sören. " Flóki's voice - and the energy emanating from him - made Sören open his eyes again and look at him. Flóki shook his head. "In wintertime, a forest looks dead. Trees barren, wildlife missing, ground frozen. But it's not dead. It comes back, in the spring. The trees sprout new leaves, the wildlife comes out of hibernation, the snow melts and the water makes the grass grow green. Your soul may be in winter right now, but it will not last forever. And it may be in your best interests to try to force an end to that winter in your spirit... to relight the flame in you somehow, some way. I am deeply concerned for you right now.”

“Why are you even...” Sören blinked slowly. “What does this have to do with you being a Balrog and killing me eons ago? What does this have to do with Odin? What does this have to do with the Ragnarök?”

Flóki gave him a look like he was a stubborn child not listening to what was being said. “It has everything to do with your art. The Silmarils were your art, back then. And they were more than just three shiny stones. That other version of you used them to smite Morgoth and destroy an entire fucking universe. There is power in those stones... power you still have. Here.” Flóki tapped his heart.

Sören was reminded of something Ingwion told him just before Ingwion left, when Ingwion was showing him the portals – the aurora australis at Uluru.

The strength of your heart is your greatest weapon. Your sensitivity, that intensity in you, the depth and power of your emotions. If you unchain your heart when you fight... you would be surprised what you can accomplish. Show him your fire. This is what your energy is like... the fire in the sky. The Valar gave you darkness, but there you are, burning bright.

Their eyes met and Flóki nodded, as if he were seeing the memory too. “This is why I want to help you, Sören Sigurðsson. Curufinwë Fëanáro. It's not just about me repaying my debt because I took your life. It's not just about claiming you because Odin took your parents and he ought not to have done that. It's because of who and what you are. It's because of what you see through the eyes of flame... what you bring to life with your hands. I would not see your gift pass from this world.”

Sören had no words to respond to that. A part of him wondered if it was just flattery trying to disarm him... but flattery was by its nature superficial and this was deep. Flóki seemed to speak to the deeper truth of him. Flóki's words suggested that he got it .

Sören wished he had a way of being absolutely sure. He racked his brain for a moment. He could wait until Maglor and Dooku got back to pass his verdict, but he also knew that defeated the entire purpose of having asked them to go out, having set up this meeting –

he didn't think they were capable of giving an unbiased, Force-only opinion in this particular case, it hit too close to home for them.

Then the thought came to him. He remembered Maglor's scarred hand – that the Silmarils had been hallowed so that nothing evil or unclean could touch them without being burned. And when the first Silmaril had been reclaimed close to a year ago, Maglor had not simply been able to hold it, but it healed his hand, as if it recognized any misdeeds were a long time ago and Maglor had been trying to be a quiet force for good in the literal ages since then.

“Do me a favor?” Sören raised an eyebrow. “Go out to the backyard and wait for me there?”

Flóki took a deep breath, and broadcasted a mental image of Sören coming out with a sword.

Not yet, Sören thought to himself. *Hopefully not at all.*

Sören went to the studio and got the two Silmarils. It was dark when he stepped outside, and the Silmarils were like a klieg light. Flóki's eyes widened at the sight of them, the way the jewels cast rainbows over him, over the fence, over the snow.

“If you are truly an ally, you will swear fealty to me,” Sören said. “You will swear your service. I will not abuse it the way Odin has. But I ask that you swear on the Silmarils.” *They will burn you if you are lying to me in any way*

Sören let go of the Silmarils and watched them float up, laughing with delight as they hovered in the air, sparkling. He could hear a car outside and for a brief second he felt panic, hoping the neighbors weren't watching this and wondering what the hell those were. He decided to err on the side of caution and stop the show, using the Force to pull the stones down, and they pulsed in his hands like two small hearts, warm, as he walked over to the god, slowly.

And just as Flóki reached out for the two Silmarils, the back door slammed open and there was Maglor, somehow looking even angrier than he had this morning, than he had last week when Flóki revealed he had once been a Balrog.

"*You."* Maglor narrowed his eyes at Flóki. "Bad enough you came back here, but now you dare to touch the Silmarils, you *filth?*"

Chapter 13

Sören held up a hand. "Maglor no -"

But before Sören could call out "let him explain", Maglor leapt onto Flóki like a giant predatory cat, wrestling him to the ground. Maglor tried to grab the Silmarils away from Flóki; Sören used the Force to pull the Silmarils over to him. "Maglor *stop*," Sören yelled. "Let him explain..."

"There is nothing to explain." Maglor's fists flew, punching Flóki's face and chest. Then he grabbed Flóki by the throat and began to choke him.

That was enough. Even though Flóki wasn't even putting up a fight - Flóki seemed to be letting Maglor beat him, to unleash the eons of pent-up grief over his father's death - Sören still couldn't take it. But he was also angry that Maglor had called Flóki filth - someone he loved - and just as angry that Maglor would deem Flóki unworthy to touch the Silmarils when that was not for him to decide.

Sören waved his free hand and pushed. Maglor was thrown off of Flóki into the air and fell two feet away. Maglor got up. Flóki was still laying there. Maglor brushed himself off and then he ran towards Flóki and lunged again. Before he could make contact, Maglor went flying again, this time farther, landing harder. Maglor finally looked at Sören, and he was stunned.

"You -"

"I told you to *stop*, Kanafinwë." Sören heard the edge in his voice, felt it on his face. He shook his head. "No more of this."

Maglor caught his breath. “You... you can't let him hold that." Maglor shook his head.

"I bloody well *can* and I *will* because last time I checked, Kanafinwë, the Silmarils were mine. Fëanor's. Not yours. If I wasn't here then they'd go to you by right, of course. But I'm here now, and it is *my* call who is and isn't worthy. I was going to have him swear to me on the Silmarils.”

But Maglor still looked ready to kill for them, and Sören decided he was going to forego letting Flóki hold the Silmarils as part of the oath.

“Swear without the Silmarils,” Sören said.

Flóki knelt and bowed his head. “I swear it.”

Maglor looked angry all over again. "So that's what you decided, then. To let him live, and he swore allegiance to you."

"Yes." Sören nodded. "That's exactly what I decided. Is there a problem?"

"He may get to live, but he's not going to enjoy it." With that, Maglor set himself upon Flóki again, this time harder than before, shoving Flóki up against the wall, punching, kicking.

Just before Sören could Force throw Maglor again, Dooku came behind Sören and put a hand on his shoulder and Sören felt like he was put in a sort of lock. He could still talk, but

it was otherwise like trying to push through plate glass. "Nico. Flóki swore an oath to me. You can't let him -"

"I'll make sure Macalaurë doesn't kill him." Dooku patted Sören's shoulder.

That *infuriated* Sören. "Did you not hear what I said? He swore an*oath*. Does that mean nothing to you, Fingolfin?"

Dooku said nothing.

Sören was angry enough now that, feeding on the rage burning in him, he pushed as hard as he could - first to break past the lock Dooku had on him, where he couldn't move or use the Force - and then he used the Force to shove Maglor off of Flóki once again. Just before Dooku could reach out and grab Sören to put him in another Force-lock, Sören raised his fist and Dooku went up in the air and began to choke.

"You will *not*," Sören growled, "Ever. Do that to me again."

Their eyes met. Dooku gave Sören a pleading look. Sören let go and Dooku fell hard - if this had been before Ingwion's blood had changed his physiology, he likely would have broken at least a couple bones in the fall. Sören saw Maglor getting up and Sören threw him again, not wanting to take any chances.

_

Sören took a cab and checked into the hotel that night, in a separate room from Flóki. He was going to need all night to calm down before he could go back home, otherwise he knew the house might accidentally catch on fire or something worse.

When he came home the next day Dooku was at the gym, and Maglor had Huan out in the front yard, Huan doing his business. Once Huan's business was done and picked up, Sören grabbed Maglor's arm and started marching him inside. “Sit the fuck down,” Sören growled. “We're going to have a talk and set some boundaries right now.”

After they sat, Sören took a moment to collect his thoughts. Then Maglor broke the silence. “"I don't know what there is to talk about. Just because you forgave him doesn't mean I have to." Maglor shrugged.

"See, this is part of why we need to talk." Sören scowled. "You guys were all like 'let's let Sören decide', and now that I've decided, you're not respecting that decision. That is a problem. That is *especially* a problem if we're going to be spending eternity together. Whatever you were to me in a past life or not, here and now, if you disrespect me, I am out that fucking door. I already went through my needs and concerns being run roughshod with Justin -"

"I sincerely hope," Maglor said quietly, "you are not comparing me to that monstrosity."

"I'm not," Sören said. "But there were red flags with him that I ignored, and now here's a

red flag from you. I get it that you're still traumatized by Fëanor's death and that's not something you can just get over, and I get it that when a person is triggered they don't necessarily act rationally. But now I'm telling you - I told you to stop, yesterday, and you went ahead and kept doing what you were doing anyway. I feel like my decision doesn't matter to either you or Nico, after you guys had conceded to let me decide. I am not asking you to like him, I am not even asking you to forgive him. However, I am not asking you, I am telling you - he took an oath to me. You will respect me by respecting that. You are getting in the way of the oath if you attack him or otherwise make him feel unsafe under my roof."

"Adar, I don't mean to be rude, but I want to ask you, sincerely, if the situation was reversed, how would you feel?" Maglor raised an eyebrow. "It's all fine and good for you to take the high road and espouse forgiveness, because you just died. That was the easy part. You haven't had to live with what I've had to live with for thousands of years."

Sören pursed his lips. His nostrils flared, feeling the anger rising in him again. "Sure, dying painfully and being *reincarnated as mortal*, into a family where I was abused, into a body with health problems and fucked up brain chemistry, and having nightmares about the way I died since I was four, not understanding what the fuck I was dreaming about until comparatively recently, that's been a real fucking cakewalk, Maglor." Sören shook his head. "You know, you have some goddamn nerve -"

"OK, that was a poor choice of words." Maglor stroked his chin. "Let me see if I can make an analogy you'll understand." He leaned back in his chair and steepled his hands. "What if, hypothetically, we found Arafinwë and we found he'd helped Justin Roberts in some way? Like for example, he was Justin's defense lawyer or the like, and he cleared Justin on some charge where he did something super fucked up, was 100% guilty and should have done time. Would you forgive him?"

"That's a scenario that doesn't exist, because Justin is dead," Sören said, "and though he wasn't smart per se, he was smart enough to avoid trouble with the law in this lifetime. And he threatened me enough to know I'd never report him."

"I'm talking hypothetical here. Like if you had ever reported Justin to the police for raping you. In theory. Don't overanalyze this too much, just go with your gut."

"I'd probably be pissed off," Sören said, cringing, "but he's still family. If Ara found out he had played for the wrong team and he was truly sorry for what he'd done, I'd forgive him. In part because I guarantee you that if he was in Justin's space long enough to help him, he's going to become a victim himself, Justin would hurt him some way somehow, because that is what that bastard does. Which is... not all that dissimilar to what happened with Flóki. He was hurt too, during his time as a Balrog. He was experimented on, tortured, programmed, then kept a sort of hostage to get free of all of that. Any evil that he did to others, was paid unto him as well. He's been through enough." Sören met Maglor's eyes. "And Flóki is family. Whether you like that or not, he is. He's as good as married to my sister. He's been a friend of mine for years. And like I said, I'm not even asking you to forgive him, like I would forgive Ara under the scenario you just pulled out of your ass there. I'm asking you simply to respect the decision I made and leave Flóki alone."

Maglor rubbed his face like a wet cat and gave Sören an irritated look. "So, were you thinking with your dick when you made that decision, or -"

"OK, that's it. For the record, Flóki and I haven't gone there, and I respect your feelings too much to go there with him. But I guess you don't respect my feelings." Sören got up, fury blazing through him. "I've had about enough of your bullshit."

"So... I'm expected to accept my father's killer, but I'm the one who's full of bullshit here -"

Not thinking, just feeling, Sören went to the hall closet, where he'd put the swords after Maglor had attacked Flóki in the living room, and where the swords had been sitting since that time. He pulled out Dooku's rapier, and then he used the Force to push Maglor's sword towards him.

"You need to blow off some steam, brat," Sören said. "You want to hurt Flóki - well, you need to go through me first."

With that, Sören charged him, right in the living room. Maglor blurted out, "Ada, I don't want to fight you" just before Sören took a swing at his neck; Maglor's sword came up to block.

Sören slipped his sword away from Maglor's and swung lower, to his gut - again, Maglor had to block.

"Fight me, coward," Sören spat. He didn't actually think of Maglor as a coward, but he knew those words would make Maglor snap and get Maglor to fight him.

And he was right. Maglor sprang into action, taking a swing at Sören, who parried. Then Sören made a riposte, going for Maglor's arm. Maglor blocked, and swung at Sören again. Sören began to march backwards out of the living room, bringing Maglor with him; they continued taking swings at each other through the kitchen and finally into the yard, in their socks. Sword clashed sword, and Sören egged him on. "You want to keep disrespecting me? What, are you jealous of Flóki? Afraid I'd like his dick better than yours?"

Maglor swung even harder. Despite himself, Sören went hard in his jeans, thinking Maglor looked devastatingly sexy like this, thick eyebrows drawn over his eyes blazing, the fierce look on his face. He noticed Maglor was hard too, and Sören couldn't resist. "Afraid your boyfriend Ingwion likes his dick better than yours?"

"*HE IS NOT MY BOYFRIEND*," Maglor roared, taking another swing that Sören dodged, and Sören made a feint, leading Maglor to think his sword was going for his arm, then Sören's blade touched Maglor's stomach. In a real fight, Sören would drive that blade through and disembowel him - Maglor dropped his sword, knowing Sören had won that round of sparring.

Sören also dropped his sword. Then he snarled, "We're not through yet," and Force threw Maglor.

Before Maglor could get up, Sören pounced on him. Sören knew he had the disadvantage in wrestling - Maglor was a foot taller, he was more muscular, stronger, Sören was of slight build. Sören still pinned him, until Maglor rolled Sören onto his back. They struggled for dominance on the ground, Sören trying to free himself from Maglor's grip, trying to roll Maglor onto the ground and pin him again. After minutes of writhing underneath him, Sören managed to do so, just for Maglor to roll him again a few seconds later. Their cocks were rock hard and rubbing together through their jeans as their bodies wrestled together, and they were panting now, flushed - the heat and longing in Maglor's eyes threatened to undo Sören right then.

"Is this why you've been acting like such a shit?" Sören teased. "Did you used to get off like this with your boyfriend Ingwion? Do you miss it?"

"He. Is. Not. My. Boyfriend."

"Sure. Just like Flóki isn't one of Ingwion's boyfriends -"

Maglor *growled*, which made Sören's cock jolt, and then Sören kissed him hard. Maglor groaned into the kiss, returning it, tongues teasing, their cocks grinding together more insistently. Maglor let go of Sören's arms and Sören wrapped his arms around Maglor, playing with the hair cascading down his back, then sliding to cup Maglor's firm, shapely ass through his jeans.

Maglor got up, breathless, and he pulled Sören up with him. Then he threw Sören over his shoulder, caveman-style, and dragged him off to the bedroom. He put Sören down on the bed and began to undress. Sören started undressing too - hands shaking, watching Maglor get naked, liking what he saw, wanting him - and the minute they were both naked Maglor pounced on him on the bed.

Maglor kissed him deeply, fiercely. The feel of their hard cocks together without any barrier in the way, silken steel, made them both moan into the kiss. Then Maglor stopped kissing Sören and gave him a look.

"You're not a coward," Sören said. "I'm sorry. I said that to piss you off so you'd fight me."

Maglor sighed, and nodded. He gave Sören a little kiss and then he stroked Sören's face and husked, "I did not *intend* to disrespect you. And I'm sorry that you feel disrespected."

"'I'm sorry that you feel that way' isn't a real apology," Sören said. "I know you don't like being compared to him, but back in the early days of my relationship with Justin, when he *would* apologize for shit, it was usually like that."

"All right." Maglor exhaled sharply. "I'm sorry I disrespected you."

"Better."

"I'm still not happy about -"

"I know. *I know* this is hard for you." Sören looked down at their cocks, and Maglor snorted and Sören did too, and after they laughed together they kissed. Then Sören said, "I'm seriously not thinking with my dick about Flóki. Truth be told, there used to be interest there, but it's a little too fraught now."

"I shouldn't have said that."

"No, you shouldn't. But you did, and well... we blew off some steam together." Sören reached up to touch Maglor's face. "If you can't forgive him, at least promise me you'll leave him alone. Because I mean it, Maglor, I am not going to tolerate being disrespected, being treated like my choices, my decisions, don't really matter. I went through enough of that, and I won't suffer eternity with someone who's going to be like that to me."

"OK." Maglor nodded. "I'm sorry."

They kissed again, and Sören used the Force to get the lube. Sören knew Maglor was aching to drive into Sören and unleash more of his aggression, but Sören wasn't done with the lesson. Sören shoved Maglor onto his back and kissed him hard, and pushed slick fingers into Maglor, finding that spot right away. Maglor gasped, and moaned as

Sören's fingers worked in and out of him, rubbing the sweet spot inside him.

"I'm going to fuck you hard," Sören rasped. "Then, if you're a good boy, I might let you do the same to me."

Maglor gave a precious little whimper that went right to Sören's cock. "Ada..."

Sören kissed him again. Sören slicked his own cock, and then he began the descent. The silken heat of Maglor was almost too delicious to stand, and Sören had to rest a minute to keep himself from coming immediately. He took a few slow thrusts, teasing them both, and when he heard Maglor cry out, knowing the bead in the ring in the head of his cock was brushing that spot, Sören hooked Maglor's leg on his shoulder and began to pound him into the mattress, fucking fast and furious.

Even as hard as Sören fucked him, the lingering notes of anger and frustration, there was also sensuality and tenderness, Sören's hands sliding over Maglor's body, Sören admiring the beauty of him, Maglor breathing hard, eyes glazed with desire, moaning and writhing as Sören's cock and fingers pleasured him. Maglor's own hands reached up to caress Sören, and when Maglor played with Sören's nipple rings, Sören bit his lower lip with a shudder, desperately trying to hold back his orgasm.

When Maglor began to rock his hips back at Sören, trying to overtake the rhythm and make Sören fuck him even harder, Sören's hand wrapped around Maglor's hard, throbbing cock, flushed a deep pink and slick with precum. Sören stroked it in time with his thrusts, his free hand playing with Maglor's nipples, making him moan louder, crying out. And at last their eyes met and Maglor gasped, "Ada... Ada please..."

Sören collected some of Maglor's precum onto his finger and shoved it in Maglor's mouth. "Come for me."

Maglor cried out around Sören's finger in his mouth, a desperate whining howl as his body shook, his seed spraying Sören. Two thrusts later Sören was gone, throwing back his head with a sob as he spent into Maglor's pulsing walls, clenching around him, milking him through his orgasm.

Sören came down to kiss him and Maglor seized him and kissed him almost violently; as Sören slipped out of him Maglor used the mess of cum from Sören's cock to slick his own cock and then he pushed into Sören. Now Sören rode him and Maglor grabbed Sören's hips, making Sören buck harder and harder. Maglor growled, and slapped Sören's ass.

"You may have fucked Ingwion, but you're still mine," Maglor rasped.

Sören leaned down to kiss him, grabbing Maglor's hair and pulling him up into the kiss. Sören's arms wrapped around him, holding on tight as he continued to bounce on Maglor's cock. When the kiss broke, Maglor began to kiss and lick Sören's neck, making Sören pant and tremble, and then he bit Sören's neck, bit the sweet spot where the neck and shoulder met, bit Sören's shoulder. Sören cried out with each bite, and then Maglor bit Sören's lower lip hard enough to draw blood. Sören shoved Maglor onto his back and gave him the same treatment, biting Maglor's neck, his shoulder, his chest. When Sören nibbled on a nipple, Maglor's nails scratched Sören's back. Sören pulled Maglor's hair again to claim another kiss, just before Maglor bit his neck again. Then Sören bit him back.

Maglor rolled Sören onto his back and grabbed Sören's wrists, pinning him, pounding into him even harder. Sören wrapped his legs around Maglor's waist, moaning as Maglor

continued to bite his neck and shoulder, licking between bites. "You're mine," Maglor growled. "Mine. Nobody is going to take you from me again."

"Oh god." Sören shuddered. His cock twinged and the feel of Maglor's cock rubbing inside him almost brought him off right then.

"Mine." Maglor tugged one of Sören's nipple rings with his teeth, suckled the nipple hard, then bit. "Mine." His tongue lashed, soothing where he'd bit while also giving pleasure-pain, the nipple too sensitive.

"More," Sören heard himself pant, completely gone in his lust for Maglor like this.

Maglor gave a hungry growl as he did the same to the other nipple. Then he bit Sören's chest between the nipples, licked where he'd bitten, and nibbled his way up Sören's throat. "Mine," he rasped between bites. "Mine. *Mine.*"

"Oh shit." Sören felt himself getting closer, his balls tightening. "Oh god, oh fuck..."

Maglor gave him a deep, passionate kiss, and reached between them to seize Sören's cock, stroking it hard as he slammed into Sören even harder. And when Maglor ground out "Come," Sören came explosively, screaming and thrashing as he spilled over Maglor's chest. A few seconds later Maglor cried out, "Ada," as he spent deep into Sören, trembling. He thrusted through his climax and crashed onto Sören's chest, shuddering, and gave one last bite before he planted a tender little kiss there.

Sören pet Maglor's hair, smiling as Maglor kneaded and flexed like a contented cat. Then Maglor looked up and smiled at Sören.

"That was fucking hot," Sören admitted. "I hated fighting with you but*goddamn* that was amazing sex."

"Yes. It was." Maglor kissed him.

_

After Dooku came home from the gym, he avoided Sören - Sören might have been ready to talk, but it seemed Dooku wasn't ready yet, and Sören would let him get away with that for a day. Sören slept in the guest bedroom that night, but didn't sleep well without the comfort of his two partners snuggling with him.

The next day, Margrét called Sören. “Just so you know, Flóki's on his way back to Reykjavik. He says he swore an oath to you. We're... going to give him a chance.”

That was Maglor's cue to “go for a drive”. Before he left, he said, “No, I'm not going to hunt him down and kill him. I mean an actual drive.”

Of course, Maglor's real motivation was to leave Sören and Dooku alone to talk. They sat in the living room just looking at each other for a long, awkward moment, then Dooku made tea.

When Dooku came back with the tea, Sören said, “All right. Nico, I'm just going to be blunt. I'm not happy with what happened yesterday."

Dooku said nothing, waiting for Sören to go on.

"I'll tell you the same thing I told Maglor - you guys talked a good game about 'let Sören decide, that's what's fair', then when I actually decided, you guys decided you didn't care. You didn't beat up Flóki yourself, but what you did pissed me off even more than what Maglor did - I tried to stop him and you used the Force to restrain me. That was, in my opinion, even more disrespectful than what Maglor did. And just like I said to Maglor, that raises a red flag. We've been together now for three years, since 2017, and this is the first time since then that you've ever crossed a line with me, other than that period of a few months where you and I were broken up because you thought you were too old and thought it would be better if I hated you instead of trying to argue against it. But it is a red flag, and regardless of our past history, here and now, if you keep disrespecting me like you did on Thursday, I'm fucking done. I've been through enough shit in my life without going through it yet again with a partner. If you *truly* love me and care for me, then you need to respect my decision like you said you would. That means no more of this shit with anyone trying to beat up Flóki, or enabling him to be beat up."

Sören sipped his tea, and waited for Dooku to react. Dooku was quiet - too quiet - but at last he said, "I apologize." Their eyes met. "I am still angry about -"

"I know. Nobody is asking you to stop being angry - I of all people understand feelings don't run on an on/off switch. I'm asking you to control your behavior, not your emotions. Which means don't go out of your way to be shitty. Respect that I forgave him, even if you can't forgive him yourself. Respect that he took an oath to me, and I have heard that oath. You should understand the importance of an oath, considering our own to each other so long ago. When you shit all over the oath he took, you're shitting all over that oath, too."

Dooku's nostrils flared. "Beloved, I think that is rather a bit of reaching, and I must respectfully dissent. There is quite a lot of difference between our secret marriage vows in the Years of the Trees, and someone who owes you a life debt. *Quite*."

"Jesus Christ." Sören facepalmed. "It's the principle. It's the spirit of the law. You were a barrister, you should understand that."

Dooku sipped his tea. "I will accede to your request that I refrain from violence against Flóki, whether directly or indirectly by assisting that of others. That is the best I can do, with the emotions I have."

"OK. We're not done yet."

"No," Dooku said, making a face. "I thought not."

Sören pinched the bridge of his nose. He sipped his tea and then he said to Dooku, "That thing you did on Thursday? Force paralysis or whatever the fuck it was? That was not cool. At all. You know my history with Justin Roberts, you know he restrained me against my will, and I'm not saying you're like him or that what you did was the same thing but it still. Fucking. *Triggered.* Me."

Dooku winced as if in pain. Dooku closed his eyes, and when he opened them his eyes were full of sorrow. He looked tired all of a sudden. Their eyes met, and Sören saw the tears in Dooku's eyes, felt the ache across their Force bond, Dooku's grief for what Sören had endured at Justin's hands, his regret for doing anything that reminded Sören of those dark days. He put a hand on Sören's knee.

But Sören wasn't ready to absolve him of his guilt yet; he really wanted to hammer home how much this hurt. "It would have been bad enough on its own, but you doing it to me in the context of me asking for a thing to stop that I wasn't OK with? My consent issues are being hit here."

"I'm sorry," Dooku said softly. "If there is anything I can do -"

"We can't change the past." Sören shook his head. "But going forward - you will *not* do that to me again, unless we're sparring - and even then, I'd prefer you not do that when we're sparring. *That* crossed a line, as much as you disrespecting my decision."

"I'm sorry," Dooku said again, swallowing. "As soon as it happened..." He winced again, not able to finish that train of thought. "I was taking some vicarious satisfaction in watching Maglor lash out. Losing you was..." He blinked, and silent tears slid down his cheeks. "I wasn't thinking, and -"

"No, you weren't. But now you're damn well going to think before you react because if it happens a second time, I'm fucking *gone*." Sören narrowed his eyes. "I mean it. I'm not going to spend eternity being triggered because you have to wave your dick around over something that happened thousands of years ago."

Dooku glared now. "You needn't refer to me reacting in pain to a very deep and still raw, festering wound being struck as *that*, Sören."

"That's exactly what it was, Nico. I'm not going to couch it in polite, flowery terms. You were being a twat. You and Maglor can do that he-man shit with someone else."

“So you want your feelings to be respected, but you would talk of mine in such a flippant way?” Dooku's nostrils flared. “I can't believe you forgave him. What happened to that fight in you, Fëanáro? What happened to your principles -"

Sören threw his hands in the air. Then he folded his arms, glaring. "As far as fight, principles... I don't know, you tell me, you were a criminal defense barrister for decades. Flóki was not himself. If he had been human, his lawyer would probably try to get him off on a temporary insanity charge. That's *literally what happened.* He told me he wants to pay his debt to me. He's on our side -"

"*He still killed you.*" Dooku's eyes flashed, his brow furrowed. The look of ire on Dooku's face was, to Sören, dangerously sexy, just like Sören had gotten aroused on Friday by Maglor's angry expression. As upset as Sören was, his stomach fluttered, heart skipping a beat, cock twinging at Dooku's anger, the power in his well-cultured basso. "I am maintaining civility as best as I can, knowing what he did to you, how you died, what was taken from me, what was taken from *all of us* that day. How much I suffered after you were gone. Kanafinwë and Nelyafinwë suffered *a great deal*, doubtless the rest of your children. And as you know, Arafinwë *died* fighting Balrogs -"

"I told that idiot to stay put in Valinor."

"You did. Does anyone in this family ever listen to anyone?"

Sören would have laughed at that if he wasn't so angry.

Dooku went on, "Maybe you have pardoned the Sky-Treader - you have a good heart. A gentle heart. But for me, the very best I can do is agree that was your decision, and stay out of his way. If I had let him try to reason with me, I would have been tempted to do

violence to him myself -"

"You don't even know what he was going to say -"

"There is *nothing* he could say to me that would make me unsee the monster that*took my beloved Fëanáro's life.* If you find that disrespectful of your decision, I don't know what to tell you. I am done discussing it, we are now getting into 'beating a dead horse' territory."

Dooku got up and walked down the hall towards the bathroom and bedroom; Sören called down, "Nico?"

"Hm?" Dooku looked over his shoulder.

"Let's get one thing absolutely fucking straight." Sören used the Force to pull Maglor's sword over from the sword rack. "I do not have a gentle heart."

—

Unlike Maglor and Sören duelling from the living room into the kitchen before taking it outside, Sören and Dooku took their swords into the yard. Dooku even gave Sören a proper fencing salute before the duel began.

Sören went on the offense. Dooku parried and made a riposte - a feint, seeming to go after one of Sören's knees only to evade the block and almost hit the other. Sören dodged just in time and lunged again; Dooku blocked before Sören's blade could touch his arm.

Back and forth they danced. While Maglor was all raw power and aggression, Dooku was a classical fencer - agility, grace, elegance. Time and time again he used feints against Sören that he only blocked or dodged just in the nick of time, even as Sören knew what to expect from his fencing style. And Dooku was quick, able to outmaneuver Sören and lash back almost immediately. Dooku was harder to keep up with, and it didn't help matters that Dooku actually seemed to be enjoying himself, a predatory little smile on his face, a twinkle in his eye.

Which made Sören's anger burn all the hotter. Dooku wasn't even upset they were fighting like this, as Maglor had been. Sören could feel Dooku's lust for watching Sören burn with fury like this, finally snapping out of his depression and coming alive, the life force in him building with each swing of his sword. And Sören hated how sexy he found Dooku right now, dashing and suave, how much watching Dooku wield his sword so effortlessly heated his blood and made him *want* to be taken, fucked.

"You're a *twat*," Sören snarled as he swung for Dooku's stomach.

Dooku parried. "Come, come now. You already called me that once today. Surely you have more words in your vocabulary?"

"*Þú ert rassgat.*"

Dooku rolled his eyes and chuckled. "Well, that's better than you calling me a thot, I suppose. As you know, I hate that word -"

"*Þú ert fokking sjálfsmjúkur, upp eigin rass, basta og ég hata hversu fokking aðlaðandi þú ert.*"

Sören could see the bulge in Dooku's trousers as Sören snapped at him in Icelandic. *Good, I can use that.* Sören moved in closer, even though it was more dangerous this way. He had to parry immediately as Dooku's sword closed in, and again. Sören made a riposte and Dooku blocked, then Dooku's own riposte grazed Sören's shoulder before Sören's sword pushed his away. Sören swung at Dooku's stomach, and Dooku dodged, then again as Sören went lower, for his hip. Dooku's own sword almost got Sören's arm, Sören wrenching back.

"*Mun setja þig á þinn stað, snobbaður, heilagri en þú..*"

Dooku's eyes flashed and Sören watched the bulge harden some more - taking his eyes off Dooku's fencing sword for just a second was almost lethal, it coming right at his chest. Sören parried, and then he made a feint - going for Dooku's crotch, and then his stomach; Dooku blocked and made a feint of his own, going for Sören's shoulder and then his arm. Sören dodged and gave Dooku a look of pure ire, both sincere and because he knew it would get Dooku even more aroused. Sören tried to pull with the Force to take Dooku's sword out of his hand, but it was harder to use the Force when their minds were occupied with the play of their blades, acting and reacting, and Dooku pushed back at Sören with the Force, hard enough that Sören himself was shoved, stumbling back a foot. Dooku lunged forward and made a feint for Sören's shoulder, going for his heart again. Sören parried and tried to pull with the Force again, harder this time - this was his gambit. As soon as Dooku pushed back, Sören pushed against him and made a feint, going for Dooku's heart and then his throat, the tip of his blade touching Dooku's throat before he could parry.

"Well, well." Dooku gave Sören another salute before dropping his sword, and then he clapped slowly. "Just like old times -'

Sören fell on him, kissing him roughly. He began to shove Dooku inside, kissing him feverishly, hungrily. They started to shed their clothing right there in the kitchen, clothes strewn haphazardly across the floor as they made their way from the kitchen to the living room. Dooku slammed Sören against the living room wall and gave him a look of pure desire before claiming Sören's mouth again, their hard cocks rubbing together, Sören's hands sliding over the silver-haired chest, Dooku's hands on Sören's shoulders, in his curls.

Then Sören grabbed Dooku's hands and yanked him along to the bedroom. Sören got on the bed on all fours, wiggling his ass at Dooku teasingly. Dooku used the Force to get the lube and got on his knees behind Sören, hard cock gliding in the crack of Sören's ass, making Sören's hole twitch, his cock throb, needing. But Sören wasn't entirely done with today's lesson. He bucked back at Dooku with as much strength as he could muster, shoving him, and fell on top of him. Then Sören quickly rolled, pinning Dooku. He used the Force to open the bedtable and produce a set of silk scarves they kept there, and held Dooku's wrists down.

"Do you consent?" Sören rasped.

Usually it was Sören who was submissive and Dooku or Maglor who was dominant, when they played like this. But now Dooku nodded, swallowing hard. "Yes."

Sören used the Force to tie Dooku's wrists to the headboard, and smiled as he looked down to watch Dooku's cock jolt, a bead of precum starting to drip from the slit. "Oh my." Sören licked his lips. "Somebody likes this."

"I like seeing the fire in your eyes." Their eyes met. "I like *feeling* that fire, after you have been lost in the fog for so long." Dooku touched Sören with the Force - a caress, from Sören's heart to his cheek. "I love you."

"You're still a twat, Ñolofinwë."

Sören got up from the bed - Dooku gave him a pleading look and made a little noise of protest as Sören walked away, leaving him tied there. Sören sauntered down to the kitchen and produced a sharp knife. It wasn't as sexy as a dagger but it would do. He twirled it around in his hand on the way down to the bedroom and then hid it behind his back as he walked back in.

"Oh thank god. I thought you were going to leave me here -"

"Oh, that's a great idea," Sören teased, pretending to walk out again. At the aghast look on Dooku's face he laughed, and then he got back on the bed, still keeping the knife behind his back. "No, Nico, I wouldn't do that. You know why?"

"Why."

Sören produced the knife and held it to Dooku's throat. "Because I would never hurt you intentionally."

Dooku's breath hitched. Sören smirked as he watched Dooku's cock jolt again, more precum dripping down the head.

"That's what it comes down to, isn't it? The oath we made to each other so long ago." Sören began to slide the knife up and down Dooku's throat, letting him feel the sharp tip of the blade, enough to bite, not enough to draw blood. "When you didn't respect my decision, like I was doing something that would hurt all of us - that was a lack of trust. But you know that deep down, you do trust me." Sören slid the knife down again, this time to Dooku's heart, pressing the blade harder. He nicked, deliberately drawing a little blood, and then he leaned down to lick the blood that flowed, tasting the metallic tang. Dooku gasped, shivered. "You know I've been careful with you, and that's why I get to see past that cold, professional exterior to the warm, soft, gooey heart. I made you laugh, years ago. I taught you to have fun for the first time in your life." Sören cut Dooku's flesh over his heart again, lapped the blood. "You will see past this wound to the truth of your heart - that you trust me."

The blade "accidentally" grazed a nipple, and traced around. Dooku moaned, and again, louder, as Sören's tongue followed the wake of the blade. Then Sören did the same to the other nipple, the tip of the blade biting, Sören's tongue soothing. The blade went back to the center of Dooku's chest and dragged up his throat, stinging, and then down, making tiny cuts, Sören's tongue licking each one. Sören traced the definition in Dooku's stomach with the knife, made little cuts here and there, lapping the blood. He made long scratches down each thigh that his tongue slid over, and then the knife dragged its way up, scraping, Sören kissing his way up.

When the knife was at Dooku's throat again, Sören held it there and scooted down the length of Dooku's body, until his head was between Dooku's legs. He licked Dooku's cock from the head down the shaft and back up, tracing every vein with his tongue, lashing and lashing, at last taking Dooku's cock into his mouth and sucking slowly, his own cock throbbing, aching with Dooku's sighs and moans. Soon Dooku's moans got louder, breathing harder. "Sören..."

"Mmmmmmmmmmm." Sören took Dooku's cock out of his mouth to lick it again. "I will lead and you will follow, right, Ñolo?"

"Oh *god.*" Dooku's eyes glazed as Sören continued licking his cock; Dooku gave a ragged groan and a shuddery sigh as Sören chased precum with his tongue. Sören smiled as he felt Dooku pulse against his tongue.

Sören continued to keep the knife at Dooku's throat and licked and sucked his cock slowly as long as Dooku could stand it. When Dooku began pleading "Sören, please," but otherwise couldn't articulate what he wanted, Sören felt even more evil. Now he moved the blade to Dooku's chest, dragging it back and forth between Dooku's nipples, over his heart, as Sören's tongue played inside him, rubbing against that sweet spot in him, until Dooku was rolling his hips, fucking himself on Sören's tongue, panting, his cries of "please, Sören, Fëanáro, *please*" more insistent.

With an exaggerated sigh, Sören finally relented. He kept the knife at Dooku's chest as he used the Force to pour lube over his cock and stroked himself, Dooku watching with hungry eyes. Then Sören guided his cock to Dooku's channel and began to push inside, slowly. Dooku pushed out and Sören gasped - so tight. They both cried out when Sören bottomed out inside him, possessing him to the hilt, and then Sören stole a deep, passionate kiss, bringing the blade to Dooku's throat once more.

"I love you," Sören said, and kissed Dooku again.

Sören thrust into him slowly, kissing him over and over, the knife to Dooku's throat. Dooku rolled his hips back at Sören, panting between kisses, moaning into each kiss, Sören responding with moans of his own. Dooku felt so good around him, tight hot and slick, and it took Sören everything he had to keep it slow, not pound into him, teasing them both. He loved watching Dooku more and more undone, losing that iron control, his eyes wild and feverish, making undignified animal noises as the bead in the ring of Sören's cock stroked his sweet spot again and again, as Sören's hand gripped his cock and pleasured it slowly, as the knife slid up and down Dooku's throat, and between kisses Sören licked, nibbled Dooku's neck, moved down to lap and suckle the hard nipples, tongue laving the silver chest hair.

"My Ñolofinwë." Sören collected some of Dooku's precum on his fingers and tasted it, Dooku making another primal grunt as he watched Sören suck his fingers. Then Sören stole another kiss, the blade biting a little harder. "See... everything works out, doesn't it, brother in heart?"

"Sören." Their eyes met, and Dooku spoke to him in his native language. "*Eldblómið mitt. Þú ert hinn helmingurinn af sál minni.*"

The words went straight to Sören's heart - and his cock. With a deep, devouring kiss and a growl, Sören began to drive into him, hard and fast. Then harder and faster still, hooking one of Dooku's legs on his shoulders, balls slapping against him. Dooku cried out and Sören groaned, shivering at the too-delicious feel of the passage wrapped around him, kissing his cock. He wasn't going to last long like this - neither of them were. He could feel Dooku on that desperate, frantic edge, pleasure in him building with every stroke Sören took inside him, every stroke of Sören's hand on his cock. And Sören's own pleasure rose, fueled by the lust of seeing Dooku completely given over to his passion, surrendering to the fire that burned so deep in them both, twin flames.

"Sören." Their eyes locked. "Sören..."

"Yes." Sören held the knife to Dooku's throat still and leaned in to seize another kiss. "*Bróðir minn. Eldur stjarnanna. Treystu mér, treystu þessu, ekki láta mig vona allt sjálfur. Taktu þessa ferð með mér...*"

"Sören. *Sören*..."

Sören could feel him *right there* across their bond. He cut Dooku's throat - not enough to seriously wound, just enough to draw blood. He licked the blood that flowed and then he kissed Dooku, hearing his lover cry out into the kiss as he tasted his blood on Sören's tongue. Sören cried out too, and Dooku pulled back and gasped for breath. "Sören, I need -"

"Yes, *ástin mín*. Come with me."

They came together, Dooku with a hoarse shout and Sören with a howling cry as Dooku's inner walls throbbed around him and Sören blasted into him, shuddering, panting, feeling like he was melting into Dooku. Dooku gave a softer moan, trembling as his seed spilled over Sören's hand.

Sören licked his hand clean and kissed Dooku. He used the Force to untie Dooku's wrists and Dooku's arms went around Sören, holding him tight.

Sören rained little kisses over Dooku's face, smiling. "Mmmm, that was fun -"

The knife hurled up from the bed and against Sören's throat. Dooku rolled Sören onto his back and now his hand held the hilt of the knife. Dooku leaned over Sören and looked into Sören's eyes. "What were you saying about trust now, Fëanáro?"

Sören's cock shot right up again, hole twitching at the hungry look on Dooku's face, like a wolf presented with a very tasty meal. "Shut up and fuck me," Sören husked.

Dooku laughed softly and kissed Sören, using the Force to pour lube over his cock. Then he pushed into Sören.

Unlike his usual slow, sensual build to a powerful finish, Dooku pounded into Sören right away, keeping the knife at Sören's throat, Sören's leg on his shoulder. "I had a momentary lapse in judgment... but you trust me too, don't you?"

"Yes." Sören remembered the way he'd given himself to Dooku three years ago, the first time he'd really *made love* after Justin Roberts. He'd felt so safe with him. Before Thursday, he'd still felt safe.

"I love you, Sören. Fëanáro. My fire. My light." Dooku leaned down to kiss Sören again, stroking Sören's face with his free hand, looking into Sören's eyes. "Flesh of my flesh." He cut over Sören's heart. "Blood of my blood." He lapped the blood that flowed and kissed Sören deeply.

Sören was so overcome by emotion and sensation that he climaxed, howling into the kiss. A few savage thrusts later Dooku came too, giving a cry as he spent into him. Then he rested on Sören, the knife at last put away. When they caught their breath they looked at each other and laughed.

"Are we OK now?" Dooku asked.

"We'll be OK if you can abide by what I said earlier. Seriously. It's not that hard to not be a

dick to the Norse god guy."

Dooku sighed, but he nodded. "I didn't mean to hurt you, Sören." He frowned. "It hurt so much to lose you, back then, and after the Dagorath..." Dooku closed his eyes. "I fear you'll be taken from me again, somehow."

"Oh, Nico." Sören patted him. "That's understandable. But please, just... let's not give each other any more problems than what we've already got, OK?" Sören snorted. "Even if the makeup sex is really fucking hot."

Dooku smiled. "Even when we don't fight, I'm insatiable for you."

"Hi Insatiable For You -"

Dooku gave Sören a swat, then a kiss, and then, his lips grazing Sören's jaw, he husked, "You want to go again?"

Sören giggled, and gave Dooku a playful little shove, then rolled Dooku onto his back and kissed him hard. He straddled Dooku's hips and sank down, both of them groaning when Dooku was buried inside.

Dooku slapped Sören's ass. "You're such a brat."

"*Takk.*" Sören crinkled his nose and bit his lower lip, and let out a cry as Dooku grabbed Sören's hips and thrust into him harder, Sören bucking wildly.

Chapter 14

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

On November twenty-fifth, the day of his thirty-sixth birthday, Sören woke up close to eleven AM, with that warm, glowy feeling he got after a night of good sex. The cats hopped up on the bed to greet him, and Sören's nose twitched at the smell of cake. Just before he could get out of bed, he saw Maglor poke his head in the bedroom and Maglor called down the hall to Dooku, "He's awake."

"Oh, finally."

"We decided to let you sleep in," Maglor said, walking in the room, "since, you know... not a morning person... but we thought we were going to have to wake you up."

Dooku came in with a tray - a lemon cake, iced with strawberries on top, a bottle of champagne and three glasses. The cake had thirty-six candles neatly arranged in four groups of nine. Dooku lit them and then he and Maglor began to sing "Happy Birthday To You". When Sören blew out the candles, he saw that they were the trick candles that kept re-lighting.

"You're the Flame Imperishable," Dooku said. "We had to."

"You're a twat," Sören said.

"As you know, you're a dick."

Sören blew a raspberry.

The candles finally went out. Maglor cut Sören a generous piece of cake, uncorked the champagne, and poured it. The cats got very interested in the cake, with Rasputin being bold enough to lean in and try to sniff it up close. Sören used the Force to take one of the cat toys off the floor - a mouse - and threw it; the cats lost interest in the cake and went to chase the mouse. Pumpkin caught it, hopped up on the bed, and Sören threw it again.

Sören, Maglor and Dooku ate cake and drank champagne in bed while they watched the cats chase the mouse and then, just as Sören was finishing his cake and working on his second glass of champagne, his phone rang. It was Ari. Ari began to sing:

Hann á afmæli í dag
Hann á afmæli í dag
Hann á afmæli hann Sören
Hann á afmæli í dag

"Awwww, Ari, *takk.*"

"Happy birthday," Ari said. "How have you been holding up?"

"It's been a bumpy ride, but I think we'll be OK. What about you"

"We've been doing all right. The yoga studio still has plenty of business, we've had our D&D games, my boyfriend and I go running or hiking together when we've got free time."

"Still writing?"

"I hit a dry spell, but I'm starting to get some ideas again."

"Já, my art dried up for a bit. It might be coming back." Sören had started sketching again last night.

"Good. I guess we're all kind of getting back to normal."

For now, was Sören's immediate response, followed by *Not for long.* He wondered why he thought that - if it was just paranoia, or his Force sense going off - and he decided not to say it aloud. "I guess so. I'm thinking about going away for a bit before we see Dag for Christmas. Haven't decided yet, and Christmas is close enough that the vacation might have to wait till after the holidays."

"You guys should come here to Reykjavik."

"I know. And we will! But I mean, like... somewhere we've never been before. Like an adventure. Hey, maybe if you can get someone to cover the yoga studio for a week or two, you could come with us, já?"

"Maybe. We have to plan those things far enough in advance so probably the earliest I could get out of here is March or April."

"Jesus, that long?"

"For a week or two as opposed to a weekend? Já, that long. This place isn't going to run itself."

"Well, maybe I might go sooner and then go on a second vacation with you then."

"OK... what about your studio?"

"It's closed till after the holidays. I'm re-evaluating whether or not to open then."

"It's been that rough, huh?" *I could feel it but didn't want to intrude. I figured you already had enough people fussing over you and you'd give me the "don't feel sorry for me" routine.*

You're not wrong. "It's been pretty rough. I, ah. Don't want to get into it now, on my birthday."

"That's fair. Just know if you ever need to talk about things..."

"There's only so much I can get into on the phone." Once again, Sören resented that they had to be so careful now with what they could say on the phone, online, separated across the kilometers as they were.

"I know. But we're a short flight away, too." Ari chuckled. "At least till Katla goes off."

"Still bracing yourselves for that, huh?"

"They say it's coming."

"It's not the end of the world, Ari." But as soon as the words were out of Sören's mouth, he got a weird tingle down his spine, heart starting to beat a little faster. He didn't like that feeling.

Ari seemed to sense it. "I shouldn't keep you, I know you've probably got plans -"

"Já, we're gonna go to the Botanical Garden and the Nature Baths and out to eat. Nothing major but still a nice day. Then I'm gonna have lunch with Margrét on Saturday."

"Sometimes low key birthdays are the best. If my boyfriend hadn't taken me to that concert I would have just lounged in my pajamas all day reading."

"Is that what we're calling it now?" Ari's boyfriend called from the background.

"Oh, god." Sören facepalmed. "WELL, ON THAT NOTE..."

"Bye, Sören." Ari laughed. "Have a good birthday."

"You too." Then Sören facepalmed again, realizing what he'd just said. "Oh fuck."

Ari laughed harder. "Love you."

"Love you too."

Sören's face was burning when he got off the phone - his cousin had seen him at his dorkiest, but he still couldn't help feeling a little awkward. *You too. Jesus.* Sören finished his champagne and showered, spending a longer time in the shower than usual, seeing that Dooku had picked up a new bottle of the body wash he liked.

Sören put on faded jeans, a navy blue turtleneck and his Nine Inch Nails "Pretty Hate Machine" T-shirt under a blue plaid flannel shirt. For the Nature Baths he got out a pair of blue swim trunks, and he bounded out to the kitchen where Maglor and Dooku were having coffee, while Dooku checked the news online. Sören had coffee and then he was ready to go.

Their first stop was the Botanical Garden, which had a completely different energy in the winter than it did in the warmer months. It looked like an enchanted always-winter realm with plants made of ice and snow, and the frozen pond added to that feeling, looking like a magic mirror. Sören half-expected to see a snow queen or perhaps a troll hanging about, and burned the imagery of the frozen garden into his mind's eye, that he might be able to do something with later now that he was sort of back on track with his art.

But as he looked at the sun shining through ice crystals on the trees, Sören had a distant memory of Fëanor making glass. Sören had taken up ceramics in London after the breakup with Justin Roberts - after he'd had a temporary aversion to painting thanks to Justin's verbal abuse but still needed to make *something*. Pottery was a second love of his. Yet, Sören was also fascinated by stained glass and glass sculptures and now as he walked around the frozen garden and saw the light catch in ice, he thought it might be good for him to take up glassmaking, at some point. He didn't like to make new year's resolutions or goals but 2021 was quickly approaching and maybe that could be something to do in the coming year...

Sören's mind was racing with thoughts of making glass art when they were in the jeep. "Can we stop at the falls?" he asked, meaning the Goðafoss.

They took a detour. No matter how many times he'd seen the Goðafoss waterfall throughout his lifetime, it was still a place of wonder for Sören, watching the powerful falls rush down into their pool, a pool where the lawspeaker Þorgeir Ljósvetningagoði had thrown down his idols, renouncing the old gods, turning Iceland to Christianity. Sören was no fan of Christianity - the religion of his fanatic aunt, who had used Christ's name as a crutch to justify her abuse - but he was even less of a fan of Odin. It had become not simply a place of wonder for Sören, but a place of power, knowing Odin's hold over the country had been broken there over a thousand years ago, and it was no wonder he was so drawn to the place beyond its natural beauty.

The wolf will drink from the falls, until only your blood is what slakes my thirst, Bölverkr.

Sören took a coin from his pocket, an old superstition that he practiced whenever it seemed his life was about to undergo a major change. He didn't quite understand it now, but he tossed the coin into the falls, and in his mind's eye he saw himself in a forge, shirtless, blowing glass.

They were usually alone at the falls, especially in the winter months when there were fewer tourists, but Sören heard a vehicle pulling in, stereo blasting. He looked and saw a jeep, and their music was louder as it got closer. Sören recognized the song:

Do you come from a land down under?
Where women glow and men plunder?
Can't you hear, can't you hear the thunder?
You better run, you better take cover

Sören, Dooku and Maglor took that as their cue to leave - the Living Force energy of the falls was strong, what Dooku had once called a Force Nexus, and it was harder for Maglor to keep up the appearance of being human in such a place. They got in their jeep and took off, and as Sören watched the falls roll away out the window, Sören had the same sense that he'd had at Reynisfjara awhile back, and his studio - that this was the last time he'd see the Goðafoss. It made no sense, but he couldn't shake the feeling, and it disturbed him now more than ever. It was one thing to feel that way at Reynisfjara in anticipation of the Dagorath. But now after the Dagorath... what else was coming?

To make matters worse, Sören ended up with "Down Under" by Men At Work as an earworm, and he'd found one of the only ways to get rid of an earworm was to play the song on repeat until it went away. Moreso than other earworms he'd had, this felt almost like a madness mantra, something someone would sing over and over again as they snapped. Sören didn't like that feeling, this earworm as he felt like the other shoe was going to drop anytime now. He needed it out of his head. He requested the 80s playlist in the jeep, and then that particular song, and he sang along in the backseat:

Travelling in a fried-out Kombi
On a hippie trail, head full of zombie
I met a strange lady, she made me nervous
She took me in and gave me breakfast
And she said:

"Do you come from a land down under
Where women glow and men plunder
Can't you hear, can't you hear the thunder
You better run, you better take cover."

Buying bread from a man in Brussels

He was six foot four and full of muscles
I said, "Do you speak-a my language?"
He just smiled and gave me a Vegemite sandwich
And he said:

"I come from a land down under
Where beer does flow and men chunder
Can't you hear, can't you hear the thunder
You better run, you better take cover."

They arrived at the Nature Baths at Lake Mývatn just as the sun was starting to set. They showered first, as per the requirement, and Sören ogled Maglor and Dooku, going hard at the sight of them naked, forcing himself to wait till they got home later to do anything about it since this wasn't exactly a private place. Sören pulled on his blue swim trunks and his husbands followed him out to the hot spring.

Cuddling together in the hot spring, watching the sunset blaze and fade to blue twilight and deep purple night, the stars rising, was a magical experience. They took turns kissing in between nips of ice-cold beer, and Sören once again had to restrain the urge to do something naughty right then and there. But just snuggling, itself, was nice, and here under the beautiful, seemingly endless sky, after feeling earlier like the other shoe was going to drop, there was solace, serenity. Sören had that moment of feeling like things were finally OK again.

For now, came that thought he'd had earlier, this time stronger than before, the pit of his stomach rising.

Jesus Christ. Sören blinked back tears. *Am I ever going to stop worrying about shit?*

Just before Sören could suggest they leave, the northern lights lit up the sky. Sören gasped and his anxiety was replaced by joy, watching nature's pyrotechnics, the play of green and blue and violet, the way the colors seemed to sing. Sören took Dooku and Maglor's hands and kissed them, held them to his heart and let them feel his euphoria, his awe at the magnificence of the world. For all of its problems, he loved the world and the beauty of it, these moments when he felt at one with nature, where everything felt like magic.

Maglor wanted to listen to Cocteau Twins on the way from Lake Mývatn to the Mexican restaurant, which was the perfect ambiance for driving under the northern lights. Sören curled up in a blanket in the back seat, warm and cozy in the jeep, continuing to watch the aurora sky as Liz Fraser's glossolalia expressed the ineffable, feeling beyond words, shimmering and soaring with the lights weaving above them.

Sören had a chicken tortilla bowl which was nice and filling, enough that he needed to take a little nap when they got home. Sören got in his pajamas and he and Maglor spooned, with Huan and the cats cuddling with them, while Dooku worked on his laptop, writing. To the sound of cats purring, Sören fell asleep.

He woke up to Maglor raining kisses over his face, and Dooku brought in more cake. It was late evening now, later than Sören expected - he'd napped for a few hours, not just an hour or less - but still technically his birthday. And so they took turns feeding each other bites of cake, and Sören teased them by sensually licking and sucking the fork, licking and sucking their fingers. "It's really warm in here," Sören said, taking off his pajama top, and then when Dooku fed him another bite of cake, Sören used the Force to make it slide off the fork onto his bare chest, right near his nipple. "Whoopsidoodle,"

Sören said with an innocent face that wasn't innocent at all.

Dooku gave him a look, but his eyes twinkled, and he lowered his head to eat the bit of cake off Sören's chest, tongue "accidentally" brushing the nipple nearby. Sören then "accidentally" spilled champagne onto his other nipple for Maglor to lap up, and that led to Dooku and Maglor licking and suckling his nipples at the same time, Sören's cock springing to life, clutching their heads and arching to them, moaning. "Fuck cake," Sören panted. "Eat me instead."

Then Sören's phone went off.

We come from the land of the ice and snow
From the midnight sun, where the hot springs flow

Sören used the Force to grab his phone from the bedtable where it was on the charger. "Great timing, Dag," Sören muttered as he swiped to accept. "Hej."

Dagnýr replied in English. "Hi! Happy birthday!"

Sören chuckled. "Jæja, happy birthday! I knew you'd be calling sometime today -"

"Yeah, I wanted to call sooner than this, but you know, school, kids..." Dagnýr laughed. "Never a dull moment."

"I bet. You have plans though, right? All work and no play, and all of that." Snúður and Huan got onto the bed, as if they knew their uncle was on the phone.

"Yeah, Matt and I are on the highway now. We're going out to eat, and then we're gonna see the new Marvel movie. Did you do anything fun for your birthday, even though, well, you know."

Sören knew - it almost seemed pointless to celebrate his birthday now that he was immortal, but after having wished for death more than once in his life it was a chance to celebrate his life. "We went to the Botanical Garden, and also went to dinner..." Sören decided not to tell his brother about the Nature Baths, as he didn't want to break down crying about the aurora. "Nico made a cake, and just before you called the three of us were gonna, um."

"Play a game of Uno?"

"Mmmmmm, something like that."

"Dammit, Sören, TMI."

Sören snickered. Snúður meowed into the phone, and then Huan barked in the distance. "The fur children say hello," Sören said. "How are my goddaughters?"

"Beautiful, wonderful, and perfect. They never cease to amaze me, I made these."

Sören felt that sharp ache again, wishing he wasn't jealous of his brother having children. "I hope you got a sitter for the night so you get at least a few hours peace and quiet...?"

"Yeah, I did." Dagnýr laughed, as if to say*is there ever peace and quiet?* "I get anxiety being away from them, but..."

"You need a break every so often and it doesn't make you a bad parent, it makes you human." Sören caught himself then, with a little snort. *Not that we're really human.*

"Mhm. Well... I don't want to keep you from your ahem, perfectly chaste and pure, wholesome game of Uno. I just wanted to let you know I'm thinking of you on our birthday."

"*Takk, litli bróðir.*" For some reason even more than the birthday wishes than his sister and his cousin, it was his twin that got to him. Sören felt himself getting choked up, missing Dag fiercely.

"You're only seven minutes older, you know."

"You're still my little brother. A little brother who casts a big shadow." Sören's voice was husky with emotion. "I'm very proud of you."

"Jesus, Sören, don't punch me in the feels right now. I'm proud of you too." Across their Force bond, across an ocean, Sören felt Dagnýr hug him, and Sören returned that hug as tightly as he could. Christmas couldn't come soon enough. "Enjoy the rest of your evening."

"You too." A pause. "I love you."

And then Dagnýr responded in their native language, a tell that he was feeling choked up too, missing Sören as much as Sören missed him. "*Ég elska þig líka.*"

The call ended, and Sören pressed the phone to his heart for a moment, taking a few deep breaths.

"Are you all right, sweetheart?" Dooku touched Sören's face.

Sören managed a smile. "I'm fine," he said, but tears stung his eyes.

"You're not fine."

Sören shrugged. "I don't know why I'm reacting like this. I think missing Dag is hitting me harder than usual. Probably because we just passed the thirty-year anniversary of our mamma's death, and Dag became a father this year, and..." Sören's voice trailed off. That still didn't quite explain why he was having such an intense, visceral reaction to talking to his brother. He used the Force to put the phone back on the charger on the bedtable.

For a few minutes Maglor and Dooku just pet him, and then Maglor offered him another forkful of cake. Sören ate it, and they finished their pieces of cake, then put the dishes aside and Sören was held between them, legs entwined.

The cats got curious about a bit of frosting conspicuously left on the edge of a plate and Dooku used the Force to snatch the plate away, and then said, "Here," and wiped the frosting onto his finger and put it in Sören's mouth, before putting the plate back.

The act of sucking Dooku's finger not only distracted Sören from the feelings overload but woke Sören's cock up again, and Sören's cock jolted when Dooku cupped Sören's chin with his hand and gave him a deep kiss. Then Maglor tilted Sören's face and kissed him, making Sören's cock throb. Then Maglor and Dooku leaned over Sören to kiss, and watching them got Sören even more aroused, Sören using the Force to peel off his pajama bottoms and fling them onto the floor.

"So, where were we before we were interrupted?" Dooku asked Maglor.

"I think we were doing this," Maglor said, and he rolled Sören onto his back and drew a nipple into his mouth.

"Mmmmm, yes." Dooku sucked the other nipple, hard.

"Oh, shit." Sören's breath hitched, his cock twinging again, his hole twitching as well. "*Fuck*..."

"The cake you made was pretty good," Maglor told Dooku, "but this is even more delicious." He turned his attention back to Sören's nipple, tongue lashing it before he tugged the nipple ring with his teeth, then his tongue brushed more gently.

"So delicious." Dooku licked Sören's nipple as well, tugged on the ring, licked some more.

"God, fuck me," Sören moaned.

"We'll get there," Dooku husked, stroking Sören's face. "We want to savor you first."

And savor they did, spending a long time on Sören's nipples, lapping, suckling, nibbling, teasing them into hard, aching nubs as Sören writhed and thrashed, moaned and gasped and panted, at last whimpering, howling, trembling. Dooku and Maglor worked their way down Sören's body, licking every inch of him, from his chest down to his stomach, hips, thighs, and calves, then back up his calves and thighs and stomach, nibbling and kissing his stomach and thighs over and over, knowing how sensitive he was there. At last they came to Sören's cock, fully erect, flushed a deep pink with need, precum dripping down the shaft. They licked his cock together, each of them collecting precum with their tongues, and when they kissed, sharing it between them, the sight of them kissing so sensually almost brought Sören off right there.

"Oh god." Sören shuddered. "Please..."

They took a few more licks at Sören's cock and kissed each other again, and Sören gave a helpless whimper, going out of his mind with lust and sensation and need. Dooku and Maglor relented, chuckling; Dooku licked Sören's cock as Maglor's tongue worked inside him, rubbing the sweet spot just right. After a few minutes of teasing him like that, Dooku took Sören's cock into his mouth, sucking slowly as Maglor's tongue lashed inside him harder, faster. Sören grabbed Dooku's head and began rolling his hips, gently fucking Dooku's mouth and fucking himself on Maglor's tongue. They brought him to the edge of climax, where Sören was just about to come, and then Dooku stopped sucking Sören's cock and started licking it again and Maglor's tongue slowed down inside him. Sören cried out, his body shaking with its need for release.

Then they switched places, with Maglor's mouth on Sören's cock, Dooku's tongue inside him. Maglor sucked him slowly - even more slowly than Dooku had been sucking him - and Dooku's tongue danced in slow, deliberate strokes inside him, with the same finesse he applied to his fencing. Sören started swearing in Icelandic, finally losing his ability to make words at all, just whimpering, sobbing, all desperate urgency.

When Maglor began to suck him harder, hungrier, and Dooku's tongue sped up inside him, Sören was undone within minutes, coming in Maglor's mouth with a broken howl, his body heaving and trembling with each pulse of his orgasm. He lost it all over again when he watched Maglor and Dooku kissing, sharing his seed.

They came up and took turns kissing him. Dooku's thumb brushed one of Sören's nipples and he rasped, "I hope that didn't spoil your appetite."

"Oh god." Sören gave a shuddery gasp, cock stirring again despite the intensity of the orgasm he'd just had. "Fuck..."

They took turns kissing him some more, then worked on his nipples again, driving him crazy. Dooku used the Force to get out the black leather collar and leash from the bedtable, that they hadn't played with in awhile. Maglor put the collar around Sören's neck and Dooku clipped the leash through, pulling Sören up for more kisses. Then they got Sören on all fours, while they half-sat, half-lay down in front of him, kissing, rubbing their cocks together, and pulled Sören on the leash towards their cocks. Sören loved sucking them both at the same time, not just because he loved to suck cock, and loved worshiping their cocks in particular, and the thought of their cocks rubbing together in his mouth got him hot, but it was the shamelessness of it, greedy, wanton, utterly debauched and given over to lust. After the way Justin had left him cold, it was downright intoxicating to feel like this again, so free, so full of *want*.

Watching them kiss as he sucked them brought Sören right to that edge again, moaning with his mouth full, not able to help grinding against the mattress. After Sören had been rubbing himself for a few minutes, moans getting louder, Maglor made a "tsk" and pulled Sören off their cocks, tugged on the leash to bring Sören over to them. "What a naughty boy, rubbing yourself like that," Maglor said, stroking Sören's beard.

"Indeed." Dooku gave Maglor a mischievous look. "I daresay the birthday boy has earnt himself some spankings."

Sören's cock leapt at that, his hole twitching. Just the thought of being spanked almost got him off. Then Sören was pulled over their laps and they took turns slapping his ass - Dooku gave his ass a few hard spankings, then Maglor spanked him, back and forth until Sören's ass was stinging sweetly and his cock was throbbing, aching, balls dangerously tight, wanting to explode. "Please," Sören begged. "Fucking *fuck me.*"

"Oh, *all right.*" Dooku made an exaggerated sigh, and Sören couldn't help giggling at the look of feigned annoyance on Dooku's face, his eyes twinkling. He tugged with the leash and Sören came up to kiss him.

They got into position - Dooku on his back, laying down but leaning up against the pillows. Sören straddled his hips, and Maglor straddled Dooku's knees, right behind Sören, his chest to Sören's back. After Dooku and Maglor applied generous amounts of lube to their cocks, Sören sank down on Dooku's cock, Dooku's hands on Sören's hips, guiding him. When he was all the way inside, Sören and Dooku took each other's hands, gasping and moaning together at that feeling of being joined, one flesh.

Sören rode slowly, Dooku's hands caressing Sören's chest and stomach and thighs, sliding down then up. "You're beautiful," Dooku said, looking a bit awed as he watched Sören rock his hips, moving up and down on Dooku's cock. "Enchanting." He touched Sören's face. "Poetry in motion."

Sören kissed Dooku's hand. "I love you."

"I love you."

"And I love you," Maglor husked, wrapping his arms around Sören from behind, pulling on

the leash. He cupped Sören's chin in his hand and tilted Sören's face so they could kiss, as his cock began to push inside.

With Maglor and Dooku both in him, stuffing him full, Sören cried out. He continued his slow ride, moaning at the feel of the two cocks pushing and pulling, gliding in and out of him, the delicious thought of cock rubbing cock inside him, his husbands making love to each other as they were making love to him. He savored the feel of Dooku's hands roaming over him, Maglor's arms tight around him, Maglor's hands sliding, stroking. Maglor kissed, licked and nibbled Sören's neck and shoulder, and every now and again leaned in to claim his mouth, kissing him deep, tongues playing, teasing, their tongues licking together playfully between kisses.

They kept it slow for a long time, losing themselves in the dreamy haze of sensuality, the feeling of connectedness and tender intimacy that they so badly needed after the last two months of chaos. But need overtook them and Sören rocked on their cocks a little harder, then harder still, until at last he was bouncing away, bucking madly, in heat for them, frantic, frenzied. Dooku grabbed Sören's hips and drove into him, and Maglor matched Sören's rhythm, growling as he nibbled on Sören's neck, Maglor's hips slapping against Sören's, holding him with an iron grip, possessing, claiming. The pleasure built higher and deeper, until Sören was trembling, gasping, ready to explode but wanting to keep going, needing the blinding, blazing glory of their sex, their passion...

And then it happened, Sören screaming as his orgasm shattered him, Maglor and Dooku coming together, moaning as their seed flooded him, cock spending on cock deep inside him. That feeling never got old, Sören moaning, loving it as he felt the hot flow within him with each pulse of his channel around them.

They came hard enough to need to sleep afterwards, tangling together in a cuddle pile. Huan and the cats joined them on the bed, and the sound of cats purring, his lovers breathing, the feel of heartbeats and rumbly purrs combining with that cozy, blissful post-orgasmic feeling to send Sören to sleep with a smile on his face and a thought that this had been his best birthday yet.

—

Dag and Sören are skateboarding in Akureyri, Sören all in black, Dag in khaki cargo shorts and a green T-shirt. Sören recognizes this as the day before Dag left for Oxford, but they are thirty-six, not fourteen - men, not boys.

"I feel like you're gonna be gone forever," Sören tells him, as he did back then. "Like I'm never gonna see you again."

"Oh, Sören. Of course you'll see me again! It's not the end of the world." Dag gives him that dimpled grin, though his grey eyes are full of compassion, knowing Sören worries, just like Dag worries about Sören.

Dag does a kickflip with his skateboard. It's just the two of them at the half-pipe in the park, and Dag uses the Force to pull out the pack of chewing gum from his pocket, that Margrét bought for him with some of her money working as a cashier, a small treat. This time, someone sees.

I know what you are.

And then there is the white flash of the Dagorath. Sören is behind the wheel of the jeep again, getting into the accident on the Ring Road. He comes out and instead of seeing the familiar Icelandic landscape, he sees the Large Hadron Collider that Dag helped work on, sent pictures of when he worked at NASA. Sören moves quickly through the CERN facility like he's on a conveyer belt and then he's thrown outside to watch the sky rip open, like a black hole has finally happened and is sucking up the Earth. But it's here for Dag, screaming and reaching out for Sören as he flies up into the air and up, up, up into the whirling vortex in the sky.

"Dag!" Sören screams, and jumps, trying to reach for him, but he's chained up. He can't see the chain but he can feel it, yanking him, weighing him down. "Dag! DAG!"

"Sören!" Sören can't see Dag anymore but he can*hear* him. And then Dag is just screaming, wordlessly.

Sören begins to scream too.

From the vortex he hears the voice again:*I know what you are. I know what you are. I know what you are...*

There is a homeless-looking woman standing by him now, filthy, matted grey hair, wearing rags, stinking to high heaven. She puts a hand on Sören's shoulder, and Sören tries to not recoil, knowing but for a twist or turn of fate he could have ended up homeless himself, years ago - and then she changes form, into Thor, prophesied to destroy the World Serpent[1], swinging his hammer triumphantly as Dag screams. And there is Odin himself, long grey beard, grey cloak, floppy grey hat covering one blind, burning eye. He is laughing at them now.

Vituð ér enn - eða hvat?[2]

Church bells begin to go off. An old man is walking around with a sandwich board reading THE END OF THE WORLD IS NIGH. "Cry havoc and let slip the dogs of war," he calls out in a gruff voice with an Australian accent. "Release the hounds of hell..."

The bells are ringing, ringing, ringing...

—

Sören's cell phone was going off - the general ringtone for numbers not programmed into his phone. Sören groaned and tried to ignore it, but he was too unsettled from the dream to go back to sleep. He used the Force to grab the phone off the charger and squinted at the clock - it was way too early for anyone who knew him to be calling him, knowing what his body clock and his temperament were like. *This is gonna be a spam robocall or some shit. Let me YELL AT THEM.*

Sören swiped to accept and growled into the phone. "Whoever the*fuck* you are, I'm not interested in what you're selling, especially not at six fucking o'clock in the morning -"

"Fëanor. *Venenya vilyanirwanen ná quanta as angolingwi.*"

Sören froze. A chill went through him. That was the voice of "Edmund Billingsley" aka Olórin, one of Dag's colleagues at the University of Toronto... and *that* was the emergency codephrase the family had agreed upon in August 2019 - *my hovercraft is full of eels* in Quenya.

Oh, shit.

"Go on," Sören rasped, his mouth dry, heart hammering in his ears.

"Ask Macalaurë about the three of you going on a vacation, and the best options for travel and accommodations, I would truly love to see you again, and I know of two young ladies who would as well. Call me in four hours for further instructions, here is a number you can reach me." Sören used the Force to grab a notepad and pen from the bedtable and when Sören made a grunt to acknowledge he was ready, Olórin gave Sören the number of a different phone than the one that called him; Sören quickly jotted it down. Then Olórin said, "It would be best if you called me from a new phone, *the reception on yours is rather problematic.* Good day."

The call ended. Sören sat there holding the phone, heart pounding, head spinning.

Maglor sat up. "What was that?"

"Trouble."

Chapter End Notes

[1] *In Chains:* the ancient völva saw Fëanor incarnated as mortal = Fenrir bound, the goth-punk Margrét as the death goddess Hel, and Dag working on the Large Hadron Collider as Jörmungandr, the World Serpent. Thor and the World Serpent are prophesied to mutually destroy each other at the Ragnarök. In the Poetic Edda, Thor disguises himself as a woman once which implies he can do it again; a homeless woman forces Dag's Force use in public in the one shot *This Is the Way the World Ends.*

[2] Old Norse: "Would you yet know more, or what?" From the Völuspá (Poetic Edda).

Chapter 15

Sören, Maglor and Dooku sat down to coffee.

"Define 'trouble'," Maglor said.

Sören exhaled sharply and rubbed his face. "That was Olórin. He used the emergency codephrase."

Maglor's eyes widened, and Dooku's brow furrowed. "Go on," Dooku said. "Tell us exactly what he said, as best as you can remember it."

"He said to ask you - Maglor - about the three of us going on vacation." Sören frowned. "Something about him wanting to see us and also having two young ladies who would love to see us again, and he gave me a different phone number than the one he's calling from and said to call him from a different phone because something about problematic reception on mine. Four hours from now, he wants me to call him."

"That means he wants you to use a burner phone," Maglor said. He got up, and Sören heard him open the hall closet. He came back with a briefcase, and opened it on the table. Sören saw a bunch of flip phones inside. "These are all prepaid cell phones." He put a phone on the charger.

"So do you have any idea what he's talking about?" Sören asked.

"Putting two and two together, he wants us to portal out to see him in Canada and as far as the two young ladies... well, 'young' could mean a lot of people by his standards, Gandalf is old... but realistically..." Maglor sat down and folded his arms. "He works with Dag. Very close friends with Dag. So he may be referring to your brother's daughters."

"Oh my god." Sören's jaw dropped. "I had a nightmare about Dag..."

There was a long silence.

"OK." Maglor reached across the table and took Sören's hands. "I know this is easier said than done right now, but panic has the potential to make things much, much worse - decisions made without thinking clearly. Right now the only thing I know for sure is that we don't know one hundred percent what's going on and we won't for another four hours."

"Why is he making us wait that long, do you think?"

"My gut tells me he's leaving Toronto with the girls -"

"Oh my god, *why.*" Chills went through Sören. "What *happened*."

"Again, we'll find out exactly what's going on in about four hours when you call that number from this burner, but that's my first impression, is he's clearing Toronto and he needs that time to get prepared for the trip and get some distance away before you call him and he tells us what's going on."

"Why doesn't he just ask us to use the *palantir*?" Sören asked.

"Because it can be interfered with," Maglor said, "or potentially intercepted by someone

like, say, Sauron. Who we know is at large after the Dagorath. When Olórin would choose to use modern technology over magic, it's for very good reason."

"So what do we do now?"

"We wait," Maglor said, "but we're going to wait on the assumption that we're going to be taking a trip via the portal. I'll check the map for routes once we've talked to Olórin again - "

"We also need to talk to Letitia," Dooku said. "As loath as I am to get MI6 involved in this if something has happened..."

"No, you're absolutely right," Maglor said. "I'd rather we hold off on calling her until we have more details about the situation -"

"Of course," Dooku said.

"But I'm guessing that whatever it is, we're going to *have* to tell Letitia." Maglor sipped his coffee and looked at the clock. "So now we wait."

It was going to be the longest four hours of Sören Sigurðsson's life.

_

At ten AM on the dot, Maglor took the burner phone off the charger. "If you don't mind, Sören, I'm going to make the call," Maglor said, waving his hand so the little notebook where Sören had recorded Olórin's other cell number floated over to him. "If he's worried about who can overhear, it might be better to conduct the conversation in a language that isn't as easily understood as English or another modern tongue." With that, Maglor dialed the number. Olórin picked up on the first ring - Sören heard him say "hello?" - and Maglor replied with, "*Aiya, man cárat?*" There was a chuckle from Olórin, who replied in Quenya, and from there Maglor got up and went down the hall to the studio room, and Sören half-listened to the flow of the beautiful ancient language, the rise and fall of Maglor's voice, the distress and sympathy.

Sören's heart raced again and Dooku grabbed Sören's hand and squeezed, then his thumb stroked the palm. He kissed Sören's cheek, and Sören nuzzled Dooku's beard and leaned on him. After a moment Dooku patted his lap, and Sören sat on his lap, Dooku holding him, cradling and petting him. That was how Maglor found them when he returned from the studio room, giving them a fond smile before his face drew stern and serious again.

"What did Olórin say?" Sören asked.

Maglor sat in the armchair and folded his hands on his knees, leaning forward, frowning, looking like he was trying to figure out how to deliver whatever bomb had just been dropped on him. Then he leaned back. "All right," he said, and took a deep breath. He met Sören's eyes. "Last night he was the babysitter while Dag and Matt went out for Dag's birthday. Dag... never returned. He's been checking news reports, police reports on a scanner to see if there was an accident, but... nothing."

"Oh my god." Sören felt an icy hand claw the pit of his stomach. He remembered the nightmare he had last night and shivered... "I had... a bad dream last night... that Dag

disappeared."

"Yeah." Maglor nodded. "Well, he's gone. And the fact that Olórin didn't sense any danger beforehand, he has a feeling there was some kind of interference, that whatever happened was... orchestrated. That's bad news, regardless of what specifically happened or who was responsible. Which currently, we just don't know."

"So what do we do now?"

"He can't keep the girls indefinitely," Maglor said, "and you're the godfather. Dag specifically wanted *you* to look after them if something ever happened."

Sören nodded. "He did." And Sören felt a pang of guilt for having felt jealous of his brother having children.

"So... he wants us to come to Canada to collect them. He thinks it would be safer for us to go by portal rather than fly, because flying carries more of a risk of being intercepted or interfered with."

"That makes sense," Dooku said.

"I have to get out the map I was left with and look at the portals in Canada but there's not many, that much I remember." Maglor shook his head.

"Did he say where he's going?" Sören asked.

"He's going to Thunder Bay, Ontario," Maglor said. "That's about a fourteen-hour drive one way from Toronto -"

"*Jesus*," Sören said.

"Why Thunder Bay specifically?" Dooku asked.

"The Sleeping Giant," Maglor said. "Apparently Olórin... knows him." He shrugged.

"Wait, you called it a he. It's a rock formation, from what I remember seeing on a documentary years ago." Dooku raised an eyebrow.

"I called it a he, yes, Olórin spoke of the Sleeping Giant like a person. None of us should be surprised that maybe a rock formation isn't just a rock formation." Maglor's lips quirked.

"OK. So... we're going to Thunder Bay," Sören said, "to get my nieces. My goddaughters. We need to make a plan..."

"The first thing we need to do is call Letitia," Maglor said. "For a lot of reasons."

"I'll make the call." Sören said. He groaned. "She's not going to like this."

"Do it from the burner," Maglor said, using the Force to pass it over.

Sören used Letitia's business card for the number. After three rings Letitia picked up. "Hello, this is Letitia Fetherstonhaugh."

"Letitia. This is Sören Sigurðsson."

A pause. "Oh." Then, "Sören, this is a different number than your usual. What's going on?"

"A lot."

"That... doesn't sound good."

"No, it's not."

"Are you in immediate danger?"

Sören answered honestly. "I don't know. Maybe? Possibly? Probably not?"

"All... right." Letitia muttered "*shit*" under her breath. Then, "Go slowly, calmly. Tell me what's happened, to the best of your ability."

"Dag, my brother, is missing."

"Missing."

"Mhm."

"As of when?"

"Last night."

"So it's not been twenty-four hours yet -"

"No, it hasn't, but..." Sören exhaled sharply. "It was our birthday yesterday. Dag and his husband went out and they left his kids with a babysitter, our friend Edmund Billingsley."

"Ah, Billingsley." MI6 knew of him, but he had politely declined their protection program. "Go on."

"Dag never came back. Edmund's been checking the news and has a scanner to listen to police reports but there's been nothing..."

"And you're very sure that he's just gone missing. That he's not out late, maybe he had a bit to drink..." A little sigh. "That he hasn't just straight up abandoned his children -"

"Fuck *no*," Sören said. "No on both fucking counts. Listen, you must have a personality profile on him, you should realize he isn't like that, he wouldn't do something like that."

"I do realize that, Sören, please understand that in my line of work I have to ask these uncomfortable questions in times like this, because yes, even though we do in fact have a profile on him and such behavior would be uncharacteristic, he did go to the emergency room in October following a fainting episode and never followed up with a physician's visit and sometimes certain health issues can create personality changes."

"OK, well, I'm telling you, even if that's the case and I doubt it, he wouldn't just *abandon his fucking children*..." Sören felt a hot flash of anger.

"All right, fair enough. No offense was intended." Letitia exhaled. "What are you going to do now?"

"I'm his daughters' godfather. He wanted me to look after them if something happened. So I have to go to Canada."

"Shall I procure airline tickets -"

"No, Edmund wants me to use the portal system - the gates, as you guys call it. Go to Canada without flying. He thinks that flying is too risky, like we might be in danger too, or..."

"Well, it's hard to know whether that's the case or not without knowing specifically what happened to your brother. Here's what I'm going to do, Sören, before you go to the trouble of going off to Canada, I'm going to conduct a little sweep. Check all surveillance cameras in the greater Toronto area - traffic cameras, security cameras used by department stores and supermarkets, that sort of thing... both within the last twenty-four hours and over the last ninety days, with recognition software to pick out your brother. The reason why I'm going back ninety days is because if he did disappear, he may have been watched and we may get a clue as to who or what was watching him. The nature of his disappearance is something I'd rather get a pulse on before you go off into what's potentially a hot zone."

"Edmund's not staying in Toronto -"

"Even so. Depending on what was behind the disappearance, you may in fact be in danger yourselves, so I'd like to determine that first. Also, do you recall if Dag said anything about where he was going or what he was doing for his birthday?"

"He said he was going to a Marvel movie and out to have Thai food."

"Brilliant, that will help with the search. OK, Sören, this sweep will take me approximately two hours. Can you promise me that you won't do anything until I call you to let you know what we found?"

Sören swallowed hard and nodded. "I promise." As much as he hated waiting and not doing anything in a situation like this, he knew it was the only thing he could do, safely.

"Is this a safe number to call you?"

Sören looked at Maglor. "Can she call me back on this phone, or..."

"Let's not risk it," Maglor said. He produced another burner, and gave Sören its number, which Sören recited to Letitia.

"All right," Letitia said after she got the number. "Two hours, then we'll take it from there."

—

Sören went with Maglor to walk Huan, taking a longer walk than usual. Sören felt paranoid the entire time, looking over his shoulder every few minutes, jumping if a car drove past them slowly even though it was winter weather and that was the safest way to drive in these conditions.

They got back just before the two-hour mark and Dooku made hot chocolate to help soothe Sören, who sat in front of the fireplace surrounded by purring cats. Sören

wondered just how radically his life was about to change - if they were going to have to leave Akureyri - when the burner rang.

Sören picked up. "Hello."

"Hi Sören, this is Letitia. Are you sitting down?"

"Yes."

"OK. There was an incident at the beginning of the month - your brother used telekinesis in a supermarket parking lot."

"He. What." Sören gasped. "Usually he's more careful -"

"This wasn't a usual scenario. There was what appears to be a homeless woman, who tried to attack them..."

Sören's heart sank, remembering the nightmare he had with the homeless-looking woman who changed into Thor. Sören felt self-conscious about saying *that homeless woman wasn't a homeless woman*, even though Letitia's department at MI6 was aware at least a few non-humans walked the Earth.

"There is a department store at the plaza where your brother went for Thai food last night and there was... interference with the security camera that looks out at the parking lot. For about fifteen minutes. Like somebody hacked the camera. Your brother's car is still in the parking lot."

"Oh my god." Sören felt like he was going to throw up. "Oh my*god*..."

"I have an agent talking with one of the owners of the Thai restaurant as we speak... he'll hop on in a conference call when he's got something..." There was a beep. "Oh... there he is. Hold on one second..."

"Hello, Letitia, Sören, I'm here," came a man's voice, a strong baritone, British, well-cultured; if Sören didn't know better he would think Benedict Cumberbatch had joined the discussion, the voice a close match for the actor's. It was pleasant to listen to, Sören had a thing for deep, British voices, like Dooku's.

"Speak of the devil... Anthony, hi. Please tell us what you found."

"Well, this is one of the times when I'm very glad I took linguistics," Anthony said. "The gentleman I spoke with didn't want to trust me until I spoke to him in his language. Anyway, he was in fact working the front last night and he says that men matching the descriptions of the persons of interest went off with two men in suits, wearing sunglasses at night. Which..." Anthony chuckled. "Sounds like the Americans. Fucking amateurs..."

"Or someone wanting us to think it's the Americans," Letitia said. "Which is its own can of worms."

"Quite."

"OK, thank you, Anthony, I'll take it from here -"

"No problem." A pause. "I hope your brother is found, Sören."

That touch of kindness was like a punch in the gut. Sören felt the tears coming on, threatening to break him. Sören took a few deep breaths, trying to pull himself together.

"OK, Sören. We have ourselves a situation," Letitia said.

"No shit."

"No shit." Letitia clicked her tongue. "In light of the current circumstances, I would feel better if you stayed put and you let one of our agents go to wherever it is Billingsley is going and get the girls and bring them to you."

"No," Sören said.

"You do realize that if agents of some kind - the Americans or worse - have taken your brother, they've probably been tailing him... in fact not even probably, they've *definitely* been tailing him, watching for the right moment to get him... and that means Billingsley may also be followed -"

"Billingsley has magic," Sören said, feeling stupid as soon as it came out of his mouth. As far as he knew, MI6 didn't know Billingsley was the Maia Gandalf, only that Billingsley was not human, just like MI6 didn't know "Mark Lowry" was Maglor, only that he was not human, and Maglor said he'd never told the Americans specifically what he was when he'd been in captivity in the 1970s, experimented on and interrogated. "And..." He decided to just say it. "That homeless woman who attacked my brother, Dag never said anything to me about the incident, but I had a nightmare about her last night and she, ah. Shapeshifted into somebody else. Somebody not human." Sören wasn't going to say *the Norse god Thor*, because that sounded completely mad and he needed Letitia to take him seriously right now. "So it's possible that whatever took Dag isn't even human -"

"Even if the person Dag had an incident with that led him to expose himself in public wasn't human, it is still highly likely that the people who took him *are*. Precisely because he *did* expose himself in public with the kind of gifts he has, and he's a high-profile scientist, he worked at NASA for awhile, he likely knows things that could be... well... not good for the Americans if it got into the wrong hands."

We'll look into it came Donald Trump's voice in Sören's head. Sören wanted to scream.

Letitia went on, "Regardless, it's not Billingsley I'm worried about - it's you. So I'd feel safer if I sent someone to pick up the girls, someone trained to handle conflicts if they arise -"

"With all due respect, Letitia, *I'd* feel safer if I did it myself. Listen. Dag made me their godfather because he wanted me to look after them if something happened. Me. I don't know your agents, I'm sure they're very nice, you know, when... they're not shooting terrorists and stuff, I guess. But I don't know them, and right now, especially after what happened with my brother disappearing, being *taken*, I don't trust what I don't know. For example, I don't know that you don't have a breach in your agency, a mole of some kind -"

"We're doing a stronger security sweep than usual right now to make absolutely sure of that," Letitia said. "The first people we have to investigate in this situation is us, that there's not some link between us and whoever took your brother."

"Even so. Even if everyone checks out. I just... don't trust anyone to get those girls out of there safely and into my care but me. I know you don't like it, but I'm not asking you, *I'm telling you*, I'm going to Canada to get my goddaughters. I made a promise to my brother,

I gave him my word."

There was a very long pause. Sören's fists clenched.

Letitia sighed. "Fine."

Sören realized then that he'd been holding his breath, and it came out in little gasps. He was shaking again.

"If you're going to be a stubborn arse about it, I won't stop you. However, I'd like to butt my head in at least a little, to keep things under control as much as I can. Starting with some protocol that I'd prefer you follow."

"I won't say no to free advice from the professionals," Sören said. "I may seem reckless, but I want to do this right."

"Right, so... if you're using the portals, I'd prefer that you use the least-trafficked ones. I know you're leaving by the Dimmuborgir, which, lucky for you, doesn't get a lot of visitors this time of year. But wherever you're coming into Canada, the more remote, the better. We're already going to have our hands tied between trying to find out whoever took your brother, and trying to get him back if we can find that out, *and* trying to find out if it's just your brother they're after or if you and your other relatives are potentially in danger. That's a lot of manpower on the ground for our small department -"

"One more reason for me to go to Canada myself, then."

"Listen, Sören, I wouldn't mind sparing an agent to go to Canada to get the girls, or even to come with you to get the girls if you'd rather -"

"No."

"But yes, as far as monitoring the portals goes so we don't have another incident like the one in England where you were spotted at the Smithy... we don't really have the capacity to do that. So we're going to trust your judgment to use a terminus that won't create an incident, or if it does... you'll have to deal with it yourself by any means necessary, do you understand what I mean by that?"

"Uh..."

"Do you have a gun, Sören?"

"*What.*" He blinked. The idea of shooting someone made him feel even more nauseated. "Uh. Well. Mark has a gun..."

"If he's coming, bring it. Bring it anyway. Hopefully you won't have to use it -"

"*Jesus.*" If this had been pre-immortality, Sören knew he'd be having an asthma attack right now, if he hadn't already had one.

"In addition to using a more remote, low traffic portal, I need you to stay off the radar as much as possible. I'm going to send you a little care package in two hours. It will include cash, Canadian currency. Do not use plastic, not even under Mark's aliases. As much as you're going to hate this, it would be better if you could keep out of hotels altogether - at least on the way to get the girls, I know winter camping with them on the way back might be more of an issue with the freezing temperatures... but we don't want to risk someone

being able to give a description to authorities if things get hot."

"You really think..."

"I don't know *what* to think and that's part of the problem. We have to account for all possible scenarios, including the worst-case one where you and your sister are also being targeted. I don't want to completely go off the deep end with panic, it's prudent to see how things play out a bit more before we start making decisions that impact you more long-term, for a number of reasons one of which being the aforementioned manpower, but for right now, plan to limit dealing with other humans as much as possible, except when it can't be avoided."

"OK."

"Finally... I need to know where you're coming in, and where you'll be going when it's time to return, if it's the same portal or two different ones. Even though we can't monitor, I still need to have an idea -"

"We'll know once we check the map."

"And am I correct in assuming it's all three of you who are going?"

"Yes. That would be the plan."

"OK. Watch for a drone drop in your backyard in two hours, and I'll be in touch with you then. I expect you to be able to tell me where you're coming in. In the meantime, you should pack for a winter camping trip. If you don't have gear, there's a sporting goods store in town -"

"Yes, I know." Sören was vaguely annoyed, since he'd lived in Akureyri most of his life, but he also realized Letitia might be anticipating that he wasn't thinking straight in his panic and he knew from his experience as a hospital intern years ago - what felt like a lifetime ago - that people in panic could forget the simplest things.

"Again, don't use plastic if you can avoid it, pay everything with cash."

"OK."

"OK. I'll talk to you in two hours, Sören." The call ended.

Dooku and Maglor looked at him expectantly. "Well?" Dooku asked.

"We're going on an adventure," Sören said, frowning.

Chapter 16

There were very few portals in Canada, and the one that looked the most remote and the least likely to have visitor traffic gawking at the dramatic entrance was at the Slave River in the Northwest Territories, near Fort Smith.

Maglor used a VPN network to mask the IP address, and looked up the trip from Fort Smith, Northwest Territories to Thunder Bay, Canada on Google Maps. He let out a low whistle and shook his head. "I knew that was a bit of a distance but *Eru*, that's ridiculous."

"How bad is it?" Dooku asked.

"Thirty-five hours one way." Maglor scowled. "At seven hours of driving a day that's five days, if it's ten hours we can make it in four, but with the limited daylight and winter weather conditions and having to take time to make camp and all of that and factoring in rest stops, it would be safer to go with the seven hour a day plan. That means we're going to be gone at least ten days, longer if we run into issues."

"Jesus," Sören said. He pet Snúður, who came over to headbutt him. "We're going to have to find someone to pet-sit. Actually..." Sören went to the bedroom to get his own cell phone, then he used the Force to grab the burner off the coffee table. He looked up Margrét's number on his cell then dialed it on the burner, and glanced at the clock - it was almost one PM now, around the time she'd start waking up.

Four rings and just before Sören could worry about it going to voice mail, Margrét answered, her voice raspy from sleep and grumpy from interruption. "What."

"It's Sören."

"Sören? What... why are you calling me from this number? Where's your phone -"

"*Venenya vilyanirwanen ná quanta as angolingwi.*"

There was a long pause. Then Margrét said, "Well, hakuna matata to you too..."

Sören facepalmed and laughed despite himself; the laughter was just what he needed right now. "*Takk.*" He took a few deep breaths. "I need you to come up. Now. Fly up -" He was pretty sure that even if they were being tailed, there was not much that could go wrong on a forty-five minute flight to the tiny airport in Akureyri, and he would worry less with the shorter trip. "And drive back down, if possible. I'll explain when you get here."

"And you mean now."

"I mean now. Again, I'll explain when you get here, but I need you to get your ass on the next flight."

"All of us, or..."

Sören considered and then he said, "All of you, if you can."

"OK. Well, we'll see you soon, then."

When Sören got off the phone Maglor handed him a cup of coffee.

"So you're going to have your sister watch the critters?" Maglor asked.

Sören nodded. "Though, technically, dogs aren't allowed in Reykjavik without a permit. I mean that shouldn't necessarily be an issue if she keeps cool about it -"

"No, we don't want to give *any* opportunity for trouble. We'll take Huan with us. I was thinking about that anyway, since... well..." Maglor gestured to the little Corgi/sheepdog mix, who barked in acknowledgment and came bounding over, wagging his tail excitedly. "It's Huan."

Sören wondered, briefly, if Celegorm was around, if they too would ever be reunited. He got the vague feeling he was, but somewhere remote... Celegorm had never been one for people. *Probably has a shit-ton of animals.* "I won't say no but that might complicate things -"

"Things are already complicated," Maglor said. "Besides, at the very least he can help with trying to keep our stress levels down." Huan barked again and flopped over for tummy rubs. "Isn't that right," Maglor cooed at the dog in baby talk. "You're a good boy, oh yes you are... yes you are, you're such a lovey little puppy. Such a good boy. Such a sweet little baby puppy..."

Dooku's eyes twinkled and his lips quirked with amusement, watching Maglor get like this over the dog. He cleared his throat and Maglor snapped to attention. Sören tried not to laugh. "As you know, Macalaurë, we are going to need winter camping supplies. Now that we know we need to plan for roughly two weeks, shall we..."

Maglor nodded. "Yes." Maglor looked at Sören. "We need someone to stay here and wait for the drop when it comes -"

"I'll do that." Sören felt a massive wave of separation anxiety. "Please don't be gone long -"

"Only as long as we need to. We'll be back soon, I promise." Maglor got up to give Sören a tight hug, and what was meant to be a sweet little kiss heated, their lips parting, tongues swirling, a needed reminder that there was more to life than fear and despair, there was also passion. When the kiss broke, the two of them breathing harder, Maglor slapped Sören's ass. Dooku hugged Sören then and also gave him a passionate kiss, and pulled away "before I get tempted," Dooku muttered, walking to the door to bundle up.

Sören watched them get in the jeep and drive off, heart racing. *Please, be safe.*

It felt like the entire world was out to get them.

—

When it got closer to two PM, Sören sat in the backyard... or tried to sit. He began pacing around, feeling restless, feeling ready to jump out of his skin with anxiety. Already, the light was taking on that old-gold quality as it got closer to sunset - the sun would start to set in about an hour. Sören tried to distract himself by watching the golden light in the thick silver clouds, but then he thought of Finarfin and it made him sad all over again.

Oh god, I wonder how Ara would react to Finrod going missing... Sören cringed and

teared up.

Before he could completely lose it and turn into a sobbing wreck, he heard the whirr of a drone and watched as it dropped a cardboard box into a snowbank. Sören scooped it up immediately and carried it inside. He cut the box open, his heart racing again.

Just before he could use the Force to pull over the burner and call Letitia, he heard a muffled ringing from inside the box. He opened the box and began to pull out the tissue paper, and then he saw a satellite phone, big and bulky. He used the Force to lift it up, and he hit the talk button.

"Hello?"

"Hi, this is Letitia. I see you got the care package."

"Já, I'm, ah... opening it right now."

"All right. Put the phone down for a minute and look at what's in the package, if you've not done so yet."

Sören did. Besides the satellite phone there were two briefcases. He opened them up and let out a small scream at how much money was in them, it looked like there was at least two hundred thousand Canadian dollars, a hundred thousand in each briefcase. Sören knew he had a lot more than that in the bank, Van had set all three of them up for life, but this was still the most money he'd ever seen at one time.

"IT'S ALL IN SMALL BILLS," Letitia called out, as if she knew why Sören made the noise that he did. "LARGE BILLS WOULD ATTRACT TOO MUCH ATTENTION."

"I SEE THAT," Sören called back, and then he picked up the phone again so he wouldn't alarm the neighbors. "That's still a lot of fucking money -"

"Two hundred thousand," Letitia said, confirming Sören's estimate from the quick count and mental math that he did. "You probably won't need all of that but we wanted to err on the side of making sure you had enough in case you run into issues."

"OK."

"There's more in the box..."

Sören put the phone back down. He saw two Glock pistols, with holsters. "Oh, *Jesus*," Sören swore. Between Maglor's gun and these, that was a gun for each of them.

"What in the fuck," Sören said.

There was an envelope with fake documents, passports for all three of them - and the two girls - and other identification. That somehow disturbed Sören as much as the guns did, and he didn't quite understand why.

Sören got back on the phone. "Why the fuck do we have so many guns?" he hissed. "I don't even know how to use a gun -"

"Mark does. Hopefully you won't need to use it, but... they're there just in case."

"*Jesus.*"

"And this is the satellite phone, which is more secure to use than a burner," Letitia said. "It will also work in remote areas where you wouldn't otherwise have cell services."

"OK, that's a relief, at least."

"Mmm. There are two numbers programmed into the phone on speed dial. First you would hit the speed dial button. One of the numbers is mine - press 1 after the speed dial button to reach me. The other is the number of Anthony Hewlett-Johnson, press the speed button then 2 to reach him. *However*, it must be said that you should not call Anthony unless you're fucked..."

Sören desperately needed a moment of levity in the situation, thinking of the smooth voice he heard earlier. "So call Anthony if I want to fuck. Got it..."

Letitia snorted. "He even plays for your team, too, but no Sören, with our department being as small as it is and us all having to pull double now that we have this shitstorm upon us, only call Anthony if you're in trouble and you can't get a hold of me - and it should go without saying that no matter what time it is, day or night, you call me if there's a problem. I'd rather be woken up at 2 AM than to wake up at my usual time and find out we've got an international incident on top of whatever else the fuck is going on here, you understand?"

"I do."

"But Anthony's number is there if something happens where you need me and can't reach me, and the same goes for him."

"OK."

"Likewise, if Anthony calls you... it means shit has hit the fan. Right now as things stand we're not expecting an escalation, but if it happens and I'm not available... well, he'll let you know."

"OK."

"I take it you're going to be leaving tonight."

"Já, you said you wanted to know where -"

"Yes. For my own reference, so Anthony and I have a rough idea of the route you're taking in case anything happens."

"Fort Smith, Northwest Territories."

"Fucking *hell.*"

"You said someplace remote..."

"I know what I bloody said." Letitia then muttered, "Sodding bloody wanking bollocks..." She cleared her throat and said, "Right, so that's a bit of a drive?"

"Thirty-five hours one way. That's five days to Thunder Bay, five days coming back to the Portal, so we'll be gone roughly ten days." *I said I wanted to go on vacation, I didn't mean like this.*

"OK. So unless you run into issues you'd be returning to Akureyri on December fourth or fifth?"

Sören did the mental math - it was November twenty-sixth. "Sounds about right."

"If you think you're going to be later than that, even by a day or two, please let me know as soon as you know."

"Will do."

"And Sören, until we know *for sure* what's happened to your brother - and that may take awhile - the police are not your friends. The government, any government, apart from those of us in this department at MI6, are not your friends. Random strangers, for all you know, could be undercover agents. Proceed with the utmost caution unless you are *sure* someone is safe. I hate to ask you to be suspicious of everyone and anyone, but -"

"I'm already there," Sören said. "Trust me."

"All right then." Letitia exhaled sharply. "Good luck, Sören. Get those girls safe."

"I will."

The phone call ended, and Sören sat in the silence, his stomach like ice floating on choppy water, shaking with the cold grip of fear.

You can do this, Sören told himself. *You have to do this. For your goddaughters.*

The thought fell on him like a ton of bricks: *Your daughters, now.*

This wasn't how Sören wanted to become a father, either. This was, in fact, the very last way he would have ever wanted to become a parent. Hopefully it would only just be temporary, hopefully MI6 would be combing traffic cams to see if they could get a lock on "the men in black" who took Dag and Matt, hopefully sooner rather than later they'd find him and break him out of wherever it was he was taken. And then Dag would be back with his children and Sören's life could return to usual, if not normal.

But he couldn't shake the feeling that it was already too late, and this was his life now.

Come on. You've been in other situations that seemed hopeless and things changed. Justin. Or when Maglor left, when Nico left, and they came back to you. It'll be all right.

This wasn't like that. This was something else. Something worse. He thought of the nightmare he had last night. Obviously a lot of it was symbolic, but there seemed nuggets of truth - of precognition - in it as well.

Sören shivered. "Jesus, I hate this," he muttered.

Sören got up to have more coffee, even though he knew the jolt of caffeine probably wasn't helping. He ended up spilling coffee on his shirt as he fixed himself a cup, and went to the bathroom to try to rinse the stain; the water running made him have to pee. After he did his business, changed his shirt, and threw the old shirt in the laundry hamper, he heard a knock at the door, loud and firm.

Oh shit.

Sören came out of the bedroom. The knocking continued at the door. Sören's heart was in his throat, ears hammering, head spinning. Without thinking, he reached for one of the guns on the table, even though he didn't know how to use a gun. With the gun in his hand, kept at his side, discrete, he walked to the door, taking deep breaths, shaking, steeling himself to shoot if there were "men in black" there like the ones who had taken Dag. *On the count of three I open the door. One... two...*

Sören opened the door and there was Margrét, Frankie, and Flóki. Sören let out an exhale of relief and Margrét pulled him into a tight hug. Then, as they walked in, she noticed the gun.

"*Sören.*" Margrét had shock and horror written all over her face. "Sören, what the*hell*..."

Sören used the Force to put the gun down on the coffee table, and he broke down sobbing.

"ALL RIGHT, WHO DO I HAVE TO BEAT UP," Frankie roared. She glared. "Don't even tell me you ran into some friend or family of that creep Justin's and they're givin' you shit -"

Sören shook his head. "No, it's worse," he choked out.

Sören sat on the couch with Margrét and Frankie on either side of him, continuing to cry. Margrét used the Force to pass over a box of tissues. "Sören, *elskan*. What is it? Where's Maglor and Nicolae -"

"They're at a sporting goods store getting, ah... gear to go camping."

Flóki went to the kitchen; Sören heard him making everyone cups of coffee. "I called you because I'm gonna need you guys to watch the cats for the next two weeks or so."

"And this is an emergency because..." Margrét raised an eyebrow.

"Dag's gone." Sören broke down again. "MI6 is on it, they found out some dudes in suits *took him* last night, god knows where... Edmund Billingsley has the kids, we're about to go to Canada to get them but we have to take the Portal and stay off the radar and..." Sören wept on his sister's shoulder.

"So wait, WHAT? DAG'S GONE?" Margrét tousled her brother's curls.

Sören nodded. "We don't have all the information yet, but..." Sören sobbed some more. "I had a nightmare. Where he... he disappeared... and Thor and Odin were responsible, in some way..."

Flóki came out with the coffee. "When you say responsible..."

"So..." Sören pinched the bridge of his nose before using the Force to take his cup from Flóki with a mumbled "*takk*". "According to Letitia, earlier this month Dag used the Force out in public. She didn't get into the full detail but there was, like, a homeless woman that attacked him, I guess? And he never told me about it, but last night I had a nightmare that involved a woman who looked just like that and she shapeshifted into Thor..."

"Wow." Margrét frowned.

"And then Odin was laughing like it was hilarious. Which... I mean... do we think Odin took

him?"

"I think it's more likely that Thor disguised himself as human and created that incident to get Dag to expose himself which would be... of interest... to any number of groups here on Earth," Flóki said quietly. "International intelligence agencies. Terrorist cells. Mafia types, gangsters..."

Margrét nodded. "If I was Odin, taking Dag to Asgard would be too easy. You'd already expect that. If I really wanted to fuck with you, I wouldn't make it that easy. Some group here on Earth taking him would be more his style."

"Sometimes the gods use humans to do their work, whether or not the humans realize it," Flóki said. "That's my gut feeling, but speaking as a god here, those feelings are rarely wrong."

"Fuck. This. Shit." Sören wept.

Frankie pulled him close, pet him, rocked him. That was how Maglor and Dooku found them when they walked in some time later, loaded with supplies.

Sören followed Maglor and Dooku into the bedroom to examine the gear. There was a toboggan for each of them. "To haul our shit till we can find a vehicle," Maglor said, "and after we drop off said vehicle, we have a bit of a hike to the Portal." There was a dome tent that would be plenty big enough for the two of them. Flashlights, a big light so they could see what they were doing to set up a tent in the dark. Thermal sleeping bags, blankets. Several changes of heavy winter clothing for all three of them, plus winter clothes for babies. "I made a guess as to what size Carrie and Maedelle are," Maglor said, "and erred on the side of going bigger than what they need." There was baby formula, bottles, and jars of baby food, small bags of dog food, gallons of water, and non-perishable food like jerky and trail mix. "Though I assume we'll be stopping for food at restaurants along the way." There were personal hygiene kits, a "thunder bucket", baby wipes, diapers... car seats for the babies, a collapsible stroller that could be fitted with small skis to be pushed in the snow...

"Shit, we're gonna be pack mules," Sören said.

"At first," Maglor said, nodding. "I'll carry the heaviest load. Once we've got a vehicle it'll be easier."

"Letitia sent us a satellite phone, and two hundred thousand Canadian dollars, and fake IDs, and... guns." Sören made a face.

"The satellite phone was good thinking on her part," Maglor said. "We probably won't have cell reception for shit most of our trip and we need to make sure we stay in touch with Olórin in case he has to move again or... I don't know."

"Let's get this packed," Dooku said. "The sooner we're on our way, the better off we'll be."

Maglor nodded. "We're seven hours ahead of Yellowknife, so the good news is that buys us some daylight, it won't be dark right away when we arrive."

"Should we, ah... look at pictures of where we're going?" Sören asked. "That thing with potentially getting lost in the Portal if -"

"I think it's more if you just step in and you don't really have a set place or time in mind,

but always better to be safe than sorry. And it might calm you down a little." Maglor patted Sören.

"Yes, we can handle the packing," Dooku said. "You can go take a look at our destination. Make sure you use the VPN -"

"I will."

"Oh, by the way? Not to weigh us down even more but I think it's a good idea to bring at least a couple of non-winter outfits," Maglor said.

"Why? It's gonna be cold as balls in Canada, right?" Sören was confused.

"Yes, but if we end up in a hotel with the girls on a particularly cold night, it might not be so cold in there. And, well. You never know. I'd like to be prepared for just about anything."

Something about that statement set Sören's teeth on edge, the *oh shit* feeling returning, but Sören's anxiety was already ratcheted up a ridiculous degree, so he wasn't going to try to dwell on why Maglor would think that was necessary. Before Sören could leave the bedroom, Maglor said, "And one more thing."

"Hm."

"Go across the hall and get the Silmarils."

Sören turned around and snorted. "You don't think they'll be safe here for two weeks -"

"Ada, nothing is safe right now. Get the damn Silmarils. Besides, they'll provide us with an extra source of light and heat."

Being asked to bring the Silmarils on their adventure - where Sören had more fear of them getting lost than he did if they were at home - also set off his anxiety, but Sören did as Maglor asked.

"Hmm, maybe I should carry the Silmarils on my person, in my coat, rather than throwing them in a backpack or something," Sören said once he'd gotten the two stones.

"If you think they'll be safer that way -" Maglor then looked past Sören, and Sören saw Margrét, Flóki and Frankie coming up behind him.

"Anything we can do to help besides take the cats?" Margrét asked.

"More sets of hands might make the packing go faster," Flóki said.

"Uh... sure." Maglor looked down - Sören knew he was still uncomfortable with Flóki but wasn't going to refuse the offer of help.

"Come on," Sören said, taking Frankie's hand. "I'll show you where we're going."

Sören took his laptop into the guest bedroom and he and Frankie flomped onto the bed together. The cats hopped up on the bed for pettings, as if they knew Sören needed the extra comfort but also somehow knew he'd be away for a bit. Already this hurt, Sören tearing up again as he pet and skritched them. After the VPN gave them a new fake IP address in another country, Sören first showed Frankie the route from Fort Smith to Thunder Bay, which made her gasp, eyes wide.

"Fucking *hell*, Sören..."

Then they looked at pictures of the Slave River - especially the rapids - and Fort Smith, the Northwest Territories itself...

"So pretty, but wow. Wow, that's... remote."

Sören nodded. "They've got trees. Lots and lots of trees."

"I guess so." Frankie sighed. "I kind of want to go with you, but..."

Sören gave her a little kiss. "I wish you could, but as it is, we don't know how dangerous this is gonna be."

"What, you think they're following Gandalf? What would the Feds, or whatever it was, want with two babies and an old man?"

"I don't know, but if they know the old man has powers, and they think the babies are Force sensitive like Dag is..." Sören cringed.

"*Jesus.*" Frankie scowled. "Fuckin' bastards."

"I'm trying to not, you know... be negative. Trying to not assume everything is the worst-case scenario. But." Sören's jaw trembled, tears spilling down his cheeks. "I'm scared. I don't know what happened to my brother, if I'll ever see him again..." Sören let out a sob. "I don't even know if I'll see you again -"

"Oh, Sören." Frankie smoothed his curls, kissed his forehead, kissed the tip of his nose, began to kiss his tears. "Sören, you know you bloody well *will* see me again. If anyone comes at me I'll give them hell. I'll give them *levels of hell*."

Sören chuckled. "Even federal agents with guns?"

"Fuck them, and fuck their guns." Frankie growled. Then she gave Sören a look. "Don't even say 'fucking guns is kinky, Frankie'..."

Sören laughed. Now he was tearing up for a different reason. "Wow. I'm so fucked up right now I wasn't even thinking that..."

"Sure, Sören."

Sören grabbed her and kissed her. One kiss became another, then another. Sören used the Force to close the guest bedroom door.

They undressed quickly, feverishly. It seemed a bit surreal to be going at it when all hell was breaking loose, but Sören didn't know if he'd ever see her again, or anyone, and so they needed this. And if nothing else, it was comfort. It was an escape.

Frankie and Sören stood to get the rest of their clothes off, and then Frankie flung herself at Sören and Sören pressed her up against the wall. He picked her up off the floor and she wrapped her arms and legs around him, the wall supporting her. His hard cock slid against her clit, her pussy lips - she was already wet. "Fuck," Sören gasped, laughing.

"You get me wet like this, Sören." Frankie kissed him hard. "Now shut up and fuck me."

Sören took her, kissing her deeply as he pushed into her. Frankie began to rock her hips, and Sören matched her rhythm, driving into her. They kissed again and again, drinking each other's cries. The hot, needy fuck against the wall got them both on that edge right away, lost in lust for each other, the shameless, wanton abandon to passion, pleasure, the hunger, that urge to mate, rut, claim each other. Sören didn't just feel how wet Frankie was but now he could hear it, the sloppy suctioning as his cock pumped in and out of her. Frankie panted between kisses, gasped, "yes, fuck me, fuck me Sören, hard..." and then his teeth were on her neck and Frankie let out a scream, bucking against him even harder.

Sören reached out to touch her with the Force as they fucked, whispering caresses over her soft skin and lush curves, invisible touches from her nipples down to her clit, finally rubbing her with his mind, Frankie getting more vocal as his cock plunged away inside her. And at last their eyes met and Frankie moaned, "I'm gonna come."

Now Sören felt more like himself. "Hi Gonna Come -"

"Cunt." Frankie kissed him as fiercely as she could and two thrusts later Sören felt her walls clenching, throbbing, juices gushing. Sören let go with a cry, spending deep inside her, the tension melting out of him as her tight, silken heat continued to pulse around his cock.

"I love you," Sören whispered.

"I love you too."

With Frankie still on his cock, arms and legs around him, Sören walked backwards to the bed and sat on the edge, Frankie sitting on his lap. For a few minutes they just held each other, offering what feeling of safety - that they had each other's back - that they could.

Once they were dressed, Sören and Frankie came out with guilty grins. The packing was almost finished.

It was time to get the cats ready. Sören got out their food and litter, which Margrét, Frankie and Flóki could take on their drive down to Reykjavik. Then he got their cat carriers. Sören teared up again as he wrangled the cats into their carriers, knowing how much they hated this. He hated this; he was going to miss them so much... even ten days was too long.

Margrét put a hand on her brother's shoulder. "They'll be in good hands. We'll spoil them."

"I feel so guilty. My little babies..." Sören sniffled and the tears broke once more.

Margrét gave him a hug. "They'll be fine. Really. Hell, they're even immortal, so..."

Sören pulled back and gave his sister a stern look. "You know, especially in light of Dag disappearing... it would be a weight off my shoulders if you and Frankie, like... you know." Sören sighed. "Became immortal yourselves."

"Jæja, Flóki made us an offer of his blood and we're... still thinking about it," Margrét said. "Matt had some very valid points for why he didn't want to take Ingwion's blood - all this global warming... look what it's done to Iceland, for fuck's sake, in two hundred years this won't be the same country anymore and that's *best case scenario* with the least amount of temperature change possible... and the way countries are moving farther to the right is

scary... the way it looks like we might have World War Three is scary and who knows what the fuck it'll do to the world..."

"Oh great, more stuff to worry about," Sören said.

"But even above and beyond all of that..." Margrét pursed her lips. "When you guys have to start moving around, you have to be careful to go to a place where, you know, you're not going to end up in jail or worse for sodomy. Me? It's 2020 and I still get occasional shit for being trans here in Iceland. *Iceland.* Which is one of the most progressive countries in the world on LGBT shit. If I become immortal and I have to start relocating every decade or so, well... there's a limited amount of places *now* where it's legal to be what I am, and even then it's not 100% safe there, murder rates, assault rates, are still pretty high... Just because I don't age anymore and I might be harder to kill doesn't mean that I can't be killed. Or that people can't try to make my life fucking miserable in other ways." Margrét shook her head. "And with the way the world is going it might get even more unsafe for me. I love Flóki with all my heart. But he knows that it's not as easy for me to just up and go wherever, as it is for you to go with Maglor. It's not a hard no, but it's something I need to think about some more. It's a wait and see."

"OK." Sören nodded. "I just... you know. I'll miss you... if..." He couldn't finish the sentence.

"I know, baby brother." Margrét held him tight. "I know. But I need more time to think about it. And well, another reason besides following a sun god around, love him though I do."

There was an awkward, painful silence as they held each other - Margrét and Sören desperately clung, after what had happened with Dag, not wanting to let go, not wanting to face the possibility of being separated again.

But finally Maglor and Dooku were pulling their toboggans down the hall as a test run, Flóki pulling Sören's. Sören saw that Maglor's was in fact packed a bit more densely than the other two, with Sören's being the lightest, and Sören facepalmed and laughed when he saw the largest object on Maglor's toboggan. "You're bringing the fucking war harp with you. *Really.* I thought this was a packing what you need to survive thing..."

"This is what I need to survive," Maglor said. "If I don't have music, well..."

"On that note we're also bringing the portable mp3 player," Dooku said, "and our various playlists."

"OK. Well, I better..." Sören grabbed his colored pencils and his current sketchbook, and then he opened up a hollow hardcover book on the bookshelf and took out his past sketchbooks, which were full, but he could look through them to get inspired, or have some nostalgia. "There."

They also packed the laptop, in case they were someplace that had wi-fi. Sören called the last number they had for Olórin on the satellite phone. "We're heading out now," Sören said. "It's going to take us five days to get there."

"That's fine," Olórin said. "I assumed it might take a week or so."

Sören, Maglor and Dooku got changed into heavier winter clothing and Maglor put Huan's little dog sweater on. Frankie and Flóki would wait at the house in Akureyri with the cats for Margrét's return pickup, while Margrét took Sören, Dooku and Maglor with Huan in her rental jeep to the Dimmuborgir - they didn't want to drive there themselves and have the

jeep parked there for ten days, which would look suspicious. They were quiet on the way down; Sören was trying not to cry again. He leaned on Maglor, who pet and cuddled him on the drive.

At the Dimmuborgir, Margrét sat in the jeep as they got out and began unloading. It was pitch black now, the stars hanging above the Dimmuborgir like a sea of diamonds.

"You're not gonna walk up with us, see us out?" Sören asked.

"I'll be tempted to either not let you leave, or make the jump with you, so no," Margrét said. She gave Sören a sad look, fighting tears of her own. "We'll see you in a couple weeks, OK? Kitties will be fine. Be safe out there. Get my nieces and..." Her voice trailed off. She looked away and closed her eyes, tears silently flowing.

The toboggan was as hard to pull as Sören thought it would be, cursing every moment and this entire idea. *I have to do it. Have to do it for my nieces, my goddaughters*And there it was again. *My daughters.*

The arch was starting to glow. Sören looked up and there was the aurora again, green and violet and gold. He paused for a moment, his breath taken away, and then Maglor nudged him. "I'm sorry," Maglor said, "but we have to keep moving."

The arch felt like a furnace as they came closer. Sören took one last look at the green and violet lights, and then the world went ultraviolet as he stepped under the arch and felt the jump, like an elevator going down at the speed of light. Huan whined.

Sören forced himself to concentrate, even as much as his stomach hated that feeling of dropping, hurtling down down down... He conjured up the pictures he'd seen of Fort Smith in his mind's eye, the river...

...and they were there. It had been close to six PM in Iceland when they'd left, now doing the mental math it was close to eleven AM here. They came out into blue sky, freezing air. Sören gasped at the frozen river and the nearby rapids, creating a fine mist, and the seemingly endless frost-covered trees, the thick snow on the ground. If the Botanical Garden covered in snow and ice had looked like an enchanted winter kingdom, this was so much moreso. Huan barked, wagging his tail excitedly.

"We're here." Maglor had the satellite phone out, using its GPS. "Welcome to Canada."

"Eh?" Sören quipped.

Chapter 17

Dooku could see very well why one of the portals was here at the Slave River - the portals were all at sacred sites or otherwise numinous, liminal places, and even in winter, the river was a thing of power, and there was a majesty among the trees. It was one of the last pristine, wild, unspoiled places on Earth, where the land thrummed with the Living Force in such a way that even men who had been like gods in another universe felt small and humble in its presence.

Dooku also had the unsettling sense of déjà vu. He had a suspicion when he saw the map of the portal network that all the portals around the world were places Elves had been long ago at one point or another, even far-off Africa and Australia. Here and now, that suspicion felt confirmed as he pulled the weight of the toboggan behind him and had the feeling he'd done this very same thing before, in this very same place, ages ago.

The Helcaraxë.

Dooku swallowed hard. It was certainly a lot different now - they were under a blue sky instead of darkness. Instead of being a frozen wasteland there was evergreen forest. There were no burning ships. He was hungry - it was close to six PM in Iceland when they left, around their usual time for dinner - but not starving. They had been through a lot, they were in a sort of war now, but it was not as severe as it had been in those days.

And yet. As much as he wanted to savor the glory of this place, he'd never seen anything like it with the endless evergreens, the huge frozen river and the rapids rushing up ahead, each step he took was a bitter reminder of what they had been, what they had lost.

It had been the last time he'd seen Finarfin, who in Araman had turned back to go to Valinor at the insistence of Fëanor. *Tell them you have renounced me. For the sake of your children.* Dooku had the sudden, mad thought that they were on their way back across the Helcaraxë to be reunited with Finarfin some way somehow, and he shoved it away, not wanting to hope, when so much hope had been shattered.

But even more bitter than the loss of his youngest brother, had been the strife between Fingolfin and his eldest brother... his lover... the other half of his soul. *Ai, Fëanor.* He could see the burning ships at Losgar now in his mind's eye, he could *feel* the madness of Fëanor in those days, who had already felt abandoned and betrayed and forsaken by his gods, his own wife, showing no mercy no quarter to those who were not with him all the way, who had spoken ill of him in those dark, cold, starving, hurting, trying days. *Let those that cursed my name, curse me still, and whine their way back to the cages of the Valar.*

He had cursed that name, in his heart, and yet he still loved him. Loved him in his audacity, his mean, stubborn pride, that refusal to surrender even unto the Doom.

To Dooku here and now it seemed especially fitting that when all hope seemed lost, when it felt like the Doom was weighing upon them the most heavily it ever had - when they were about to go forth into what had been Beleriand, where the reborn Finrod had made a home for over a decade - he and Fëanor were here again, this time standing together. Indivisible. Unbowed, unbroken.

You shall lead, and I will follow.

His eyes met Sören's then and he knew Sören could feel it, too. Sören reached out to

take his hand, warmth radiating through their gloves.

And then Sören just paused in his tracks, let go of the handle of his toboggan for a moment, and threw his arms around Dooku. "Oh, Ñolo," he choked out, hugging Dooku tight. Sören let out a little sob and tears stung Dooku's eyes as well.

Maglor cleared his throat. Sören and Dooku looked at him and he was getting emotional too, feeling everything across their bond, and his own memories. "Uh, I'm not trying to be a dick or anything, but -"

"There's no need to try," Sören said. "You're my son, you come by it honestly."

Dooku *ugly* laughed at that, hearing himself guffaw, not able to help it.

Maglor gave them a look and he went on, "We need to keep moving. It's only just after eleven AM local time but it gets dark here early too, the sun is going to set around three-thirty or so. The sooner we can get into town and get a vehicle, the better off we'll be."

Sören saluted, and Dooku tried not to laugh again. And then he went back to being ready to cry as he pulled his toboggan once more, feeling that fear of the unknown, the devastation of two members of their family being ripped away from them, wondering what other horrors would fall upon them.

We have to keep moving, Dooku told himself. Not just to get into Fort Smith and try to get a vehicle, but they needed to get on the road and get to Thunder Bay... to his nieces... and then, to try to work on some sort of plan to ascension, or at least to better ward themselves against their collective enemies.

It occurred to Dooku as he continued to pull the toboggan that it was easier to pick them off one at a time when they were living in different places around the world. Harder if they were together in a pack. He didn't have any easy solutions for how to get them all in the same place at the same time, or at least within the same city or within a short driving distance. But the caution that their enemies favored divide and conquer weighed on him now, and that had indeed been their ruin long ago - the three Finwion brothers torn asunder from one another, their children scattered as well.

They had arrived not far from the Slave River Rapids National Historic Event, and now they were walking on an actual street, pulling their toboggans. It was quiet. They passed by a cab company, and Dooku thought about stopping and one of them taking a cab and going to a rental while the other two waited, but Sören shook his head - noticing him looking at the cabs, pondering - and made the "move on" gesture.

They continued walking down the street and then up ahead they saw it - a KFC. Now Sören stopped, blinked in disbelief, and doubled over with a howl of laughter. He dropped on his knees and rolled around in the snow as if he were having a fit, face red, tears running down his cheeks, shaking and wheezing.

Maglor watched with hands on his hips. Huan smiled, tongue lolling as if he were laughing too.

"There is... a fucking... KFC... near... the fucking... Helcaraxë." Sören kept laughing. "I cannot even."

Dooku pinched the bridge of his nose. "Yes, that is certainly... a bit surreal."

"Oh god. Oh my *fucking god.*" Sören got up. "We have to go in there. We *have to*. Go in there."

Dooku was hungry, but the mere concept of KFC vaguely offended him. Before he could protest, Huan began to bark, wagging his tail excitedly as if to agree with Sören.

"Jæja, you want to get some chicken?" Sören stooped to pet Huan, who barked in response, seeming even more excited now. Sören looked at Maglor. "Your dog says we're going to KFC."

Sören had been dragging a little behind, not as strong as the other two even with a smaller payload on his toboggan but now he pulled out ahead. Maglor shook his head at Dooku with an affectionate eyeroll and followed. As much as Dooku did not relish the prospect of eating at KFC - or even that a KFC existed this closely to the pristine wilderness, a rude reminder of so-called modern civilization - he wasn't going to argue with Sören about it.

Charlie had wanted them to stay off the radar as much as possible, but they seemed extremely conspicuous walking down the street heading to the KFC pulling toboggans loaded up with survival gear... and Maglor's war harp in its case. Dooku hoped that this wasn't going to cause issue. But now he too was starting to see the hilarity in the situation, looking at Maglor's ancient war harp in its case riding on a toboggan, then at the KFC, then back at the harp, then at the KFC.

"This is like the bastard love child of Tolkien and Douglas Adams," Dooku heard himself say out loud.

Sören nodded. "Jæja... did you guys remember to bring some towels?"

"We remembered towels," Maglor said.

"You're a hoopy frood."

The KFC was open. There were exactly two vehicles in the parking lot - a pickup truck with winter tires, and a minivan also outfitted with winter tires. The minivan was light blue and looked like it had seen better days, and Dooku noticed Maglor pausing to get a good look at the vehicles before he walked in.

There was a cashier in a KFC uniform pacing around in front of the register, young, chubby, dark hair and eyes with light brown skin that suggested First Nations, and he beamed when they walked in. Then his face fell when he saw the dog.

"Uh, sorry, you can't bring that in here," he said.

"It's a service animal," Maglor said.

The cashier looked like he was going to try to argue and Maglor pressed a bill into his hand and motioned with his index finger over his lips. The cashier gave a thumbs up.

They went for a bucket of chicken with sides of mashed potatoes and biscuits with gravy - Dooku had to remind himself that in this context "biscuits" meant a type of bread and not cookies. As they waited, Dooku felt eyes staring at them and he finally looked over his shoulder at a middle-aged First Nations man wearing a parka and a cowboy hat, eating chicken by himself. They definitely stood out like a sore thumb with their toboggans and the dog, and now Dooku was questioning the sanity of this entire trip, wondering if there

was going to be an incident.

But when they finally sat down at a table, after Sören picked off a piece of chicken without the skin - eating the skin himself - and fed it to Huan, the man said, "Nice dog."

"His name is Huan," Maglor said.

"Oh, Juan, eh? You Spanish?"

"Part Brazilian," Maglor said, and shot Sören and Dooku a look to keep them deadpan.

"You guys, uh, you're tourists doing some kind of winter camping, yeah?"

Maglor nodded. "It was his birthday," Maglor said, gesturing to Sören, "and he wanted to go on vacation."

Dooku wondered if that might be a bit too much information for a stranger, but he also knew it would cause more of an issue to ignore him and he could feel Maglor starting to "fish". He had an idea for what was coming, based on the way he saw Maglor looking at the vehicles in the parking lot.

"Canada's a big country," the man quipped. "Too much walkin', if you ask me."

"Yeah, about that... our van broke down early this morning." Maglor gave the man a sad look. "Is that pickup truck out there yours?" Dooku noticed then Maglor said "oot", he was affecting a fake Canadian accent.

"No, the minivan is mine," the man said. He looked at each of the three of them, and then at Huan; Sören fed Huan another small piece of chicken. Dooku could tell the man was sizing them up. "You guys want a ride to where your van broke down -"

"It's completely dead," Maglor said. "We tried to jump it, I took a look under the hood..." Maglor shook his head. "Honestly, I should have never taken it out of Calgary -" Dooku noticed the "oot", again. "But this has been a hard year for all of us and my cousin's birthday just sprang up on us..." Sören tried not to react at the word "cousin"; Dooku kicked him under the table. "I was gonna buy a new van but there wasn't a lot of time. I thought the van would survive this last trip."

"Well, if you guys want a ride to a rental..."

Maglor looked over at the cash register; the cashier was heading back to the kitchen. He looked around the restaurant. It was just them, still. "I'll pay you for your minivan," Maglor said.

The man raised an eyebrow as he sipped his soda. "It's not for sale."

"Fifty thousand dollars."

The man almost choked on his soda. "It ain't worth that much -"

"No, but I need to get us back to Calgary in one piece."

"You seriously got fifty thousand on you?"

Maglor nodded solemnly.

The man narrowed his eyes. "That's a lot of money, man. You some sort of criminals or something?" He chuckled.

"Do we look like criminals to you?" Maglor picked up Huan, who immediately began licking his face. Maglor kissed the dog's snout. "Oh yes, that's a good boy. Did you get chicken? Didcha? Didcha?"

"OK." The man nodded. "You show me fifty thou and that van is yours."

"Do you mind if I check to make sure it runs first?" Maglor asked. "They can stay here, you can come along while I take it for a ride around the block? I don't mean to offend, but the van looks a little beat up and I want to make sure it won't break down on the way back to Calgary -"

"No, that's fine. It runs good but I know it looks beat up." The man wiped his mouth and got up. "Guard my food while I'm gone," he told Sören and Dooku, laughing as he walked away from the table, and gestured for Maglor to follow him outside.

Sören gnawed on chicken and watched them out the window, looking a bit wary.

The cashier came back up and Dooku asked Sören, "Do you want a fountain drink?"

"Can I have an orange soda?"

Of course you would ask for that. It came out before he could stop himself. "May I -"

Sören gave him the finger.

Dooku tousled Sören's curls on the way up, with the empty cup they hadn't filled in their rush to sit down and eat. He wasn't just going to wait on Sören, however - as he approached the fountain drinks the cashier looked at him. They were going to need some privacy for this kind of money to change hands; just because the man with the minivan seemed disarmed didn't mean the cashier wouldn't be suspicious and call the police. It was paranoid, but nonetheless a paranoia Dooku had to heed.

He did something he normally hated doing, finding it ethically questionable at first. He pushed with the Force into the man's mind and said, "You should go back in the kitchen for the next ten minutes."

"I should go back in the kitchen for the next ten minutes," the cashier said and with that, he went back in the kitchen.

Dooku brought Sören the orange soda and then he went into the knapsack on his toboggan, which contained one of the two briefcases of Canadian currency. He opened it, counted stacks that amounted to fifty thousand - a quarter of what Charlie had given them - and lay them out on the table, covering them with paper napkins in case anyone else came in.

Maglor and the minivan owner strolled back in. "We have ourselves a deal," Maglor said to Dooku and Sören.

Dooku uncovered the stacks of bills. The man tossed his keyring to Maglor and began loading the stacks of bills into his empty chicken bucket.

"We're gonna bring this gentleman to the car rental so he can get a vehicle to tide him over till he buys a new one," Maglor said.

Dooku nodded.

They finished eating first - the man introduced himself as Jim Hewitt, who was one of the only veterinarians in Fort Smith, who also provided mobile services to Fort Simpson, Fort Providence and Hay River. Dooku sensed no guile or deceit, and felt a pang, being reminded of Qui-Gon the veterinarian. He managed to keep himself together as they polished off their food - indeed, Dooku and Sören kept quiet, letting Maglor and Jim chat - but Sören seemed to know the reminder of Qui got him sad again as they sat in the back seat together, Huan on their laps, with Jim riding in the passenger seat.

"So do they talk?" Jim chuckled.

"My cousin is deaf..." Maglor turned around and looked over his shoulder at Sören and began to sign, and Sören "signed" back jibberish, ending with a middle finger; Sören hadn't spoken in front of Jim in the restaurant. "That's why we have the service animal with us."

That was a damned lie, and Dooku was uncomfortable, not just with the lie itself but how *easy* it was for Maglor to lie, and Dooku realized that this had been "the routine" that kept Maglor out of harm's way this long, traveling among humans, it had become second nature to him... like a performance, stepping into a role. And Dooku knew it had to be done - Sören's accent would raise questions. His own Received Pronunciation would probably raise even more questions.

"And uncle Jacques, well... he talks a lot of *marde*, don't you?"

Dooku had been to Quebec a long time ago and had learned that the Québécois swore by stringing a lot of random religious words together. "*Osti de tabarnak de sacrament, de câlice de ciboire de criss de marde.*"

"So what, you're Brazilian and French?" Jim asked. "That's an interesting background..."

"We're an interesting family," Maglor said.

Dooku clapped his hand over Sören's mouth before he could ruin the act by reacting.

–

Jim Hewitt lingered when they got to the car rental.

"I kinda don't feel right takin' fifty thousand dollars for this van -"

Maglor waved his hand. "You're doing us a kindness letting us take the van like this. If you don't want to keep all of it for yourself, invest some of it in your vet clinic."

"OK, I'll do that then." Jim nodded. He clapped Maglor on the back. "It was nice meetin' ya, and have a safe trip back to Calgary."

"Thank you."

They waited until they were a distance from the rental place to get out of the van and get things of immediate need from the toboggans, including the portable Mp3 player and USB sticks holding different playlists. Dooku settled into the passenger seat and put the seat back to stretch his legs.

"You have enough room back there, my dear?" Dooku asked Sören, who had his sketchbook and colored pencils out. Sören just nodded, and Huan yipped from under his blanket.

They departed for the Fort Smith Highway, NT-5 South. They briefly dipped into Alberta then back into the Northwest Territories. The stereo played the classic rock playlist, and Dooku tried to relax, watching the snowy landscape out the window, the road winding through trees.

They slowed at sunset when they saw three moose crossing the road. Sören*squeaked* when he saw them, a reaction Dooku found utterly delightful, smiling. "OH MY GOD," Sören yelled, like a big kid. "HOLY SHIT, IT'S MOOSE." Then Sören frowned. "Er, mooses? Meese? Is that correct English?"

"You had it right the first time with moose," Maglor said, laughing.

"I saw reindeer in eastern Iceland once, I went winter camping with Ari for Christmas because he didn't want to be at home with his parents, which, you know, understandable. We were, like, twenty. We got very very drunk." Sören chuckled. "We don't have moose, but seeing the reindeer was fun. We were *so* piss drunk and we tried..." Sören snorted. "We tried calling to them, right? We were like *MOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOO*... and making sheep and goat noises." He bleated. "That's not even the sounds they make, but we were so fucking drunk, yelling *MOOOOOOOOOOOOOOO* at the reindeer." Sören rolled down his window. "Well, this is for Ari." As they swerved around the moose, Sören called out, "MOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOO..."

"Sören..." Dooku facepalmed, but he couldn't help laughing; Sören's antics were part of why he'd fallen in love with him a few years ago, after all.

"MOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOO," Sören yelled. "MOOOOOOOOOOO?"

The picturesque scene of the three moose crossing the road from one snowy field to the other, flanked by birch and evergreens, the snow and frost burning in the pink-orange-gold streaking the deepening blue, was accompanied by Sören's calls of "MOOOOOOOOOOO, MOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOO." It amused Dooku and Maglor on its own, but then "YYZ" by Rush came on and that seemed to make things even worse.

"Canada sends its regards," Maglor said.

"I guess so," Sören said.

My brother-husband, the once and future King of the Noldor, shouting "MOOOOOO" at moose. Dooku shook his head.

Sören rolled the window back up. It was getting too dark for Sören to draw without turning on a big light source in the backseat; Sören put his sketchbook aside and Dooku watched in the rear-view mirror as Sören used the Force to drape a blanket around his shoulders. Huan snuggled closer to Sören with a doggie yawn.

Dooku could go for a nap himself - doing the mental math in his head it was almost eleven PM in Iceland. This had been a long day and they weren't finished yet.

"I'll pull over to make camp once we're in Alberta," Maglor said, looking at the clock and then at Dooku as if he knew what Dooku was thinking. "We've got a little ways to go."

"A little ways to go" turned out to be another couple of hours. They had to stop to stretch their legs and pee, which was annoying enough on its own and more annoying in the dark and with the temperature having dropped to well below freezing. After the rest stop Maglor turned on the overhead light in the van and Dooku tried to make himself stay awake. At last he saw the highway signs for AB-35 S, with the automated voice on the GPS on their satellite phone telling them to turn, and then, "Entering Alberta."

"That's one province down," Maglor said.

"WOOOOOOOOOO," Sören shouted weakly from the backseat, such a tired, half-hearted cheer that Dooku had to chuckle.

"I know you guys are tired," Maglor said. "We'll pull over in just a few minutes."

"A few minutes" was twenty. The highway was quiet enough that Maglor just pulled the van over. He got the big flashlight out of the storage area behind the back seat so they could see what they were doing, and then things were unloaded from the toboggans. The tent was pitched, sleeping bags and blanket brought inside, plus water, non-perishable snacks for the humans, dog food for Huan. The "thunder bucket" sat outside the tent in case anyone had to go. Huan was taken for a small walk on the other side of the highway to do his business before he was brought into the tent.

They were all worn out enough from the long day and the sickening rollercoaster of adrenaline that they bedded right down, getting into the bedding in their clothes; they'd wash up and change tomorrow before hitting the road. Sören set up the Silmarils under a blanket to serve as a nightlight in case it was needed, and it also made the tent a bit toastier. Maglor set an alarm to wake them up in the morning.

Sören snuggled between Maglor and Dooku. As exhausted as Dooku was, he rolled as close to Sören as possible and spent a few minutes nuzzling him, giving him little kisses, wanting to be reassuring after the horrible news of Dag being taken - the horrible nearly two months since the Dagorath. Sören rubbed his nose against Dooku's and then Sören spoke into his mind, across their bond.

Thank you for being there through all of this.

Of course, Dooku said back to him. *You're my husband.*

*I don't just mean all of this, what happened today... what's been happening.*Dooku saw Sören bite his lower lip in the dark, his eyes impossibly sad. *I mean everything. When you came with me even after the Doom...* Sören closed his eyes and gave a shuddery sigh. *I'm sorry everything went to shit for us, back then.*

*My one regret - truly - is that you died thinking I hated you.*Dooku kissed the tip of Sören's nose. *The Valar may have thought they cursed us with this life, but we will curse* them. *We have a second chance to get it right. We shan't fail this time.*

Dooku wanted to believe it, as he told Sören. He was afraid too. But if there was one thing

he was absolutely certain of, it was his love for this magnificent, ridiculous man, the love that had made him travel the ends of the Earth, the love that made him face the Dark Lord to his end. There was power in that love, a force of nature as inexorable as the rapids that kept pounding on even when the rest of the Slave River froze. He was damned well going to *try*, as hard as he could.

Chapter 18

Sören growled when the alarm went off, and again when Dooku unzipped his sleeping bag. Sören stretched - every bone in his body hurt from sleeping on the ground, and having yesterday lengthened by the jump between time zones. Even though it was seven AM local time and not an unreasonable hour to be up, it still felt too early, like he hadn't had enough sleep. It was still twilight outside.

"Fuck this shit," Sören said.

"Remember, we're getting your nieces," Maglor said, and thrust a can of Pepsi at Sören.

"You normally disapprove of soda," Sören said, taking it with a smirk.

"You need the caffeine."

There was trail mix for breakfast, then they did some rudimentary washing up, including brushing their teeth, before they packed up and left the tent. Sören led Huan off to do his business as Dooku and Maglor took the tent down. The minivan had been undisturbed overnight, and they loaded up the van and got back in.

This time Maglor put on the metal playlist, as a way to help continue to wake them up. He threw the horns as James Hetfield shouted

Gimme fuel, gimme fire
Gimme that which I desire

Sören watched the twilight and the endless snow and trees roll by, stroking Huan.

Turn on... I see red
Adrenaline crash and crack my head
Nitro junkie, paint me dead
And I see red

One hundred plus through black and white
War horse, warhead
Fuck 'em man, white-knuckle tight
Through black and white

On I burn
Fuel is pumping engines
Burning hard, loose and clean
And on I burn
Churning my direction
Quench my thirst with gasoline

So gimme fuel
Gimme fire
Gimme that which I desire

Sören patted the Silmarils in the pocket of his coat.

After nine AM, the sun rose, in mellow pastels. Sören wasn't awake enough to try to draw,

and the confines of the van didn't do much to wake his brain, even with loud metal playing, so he just watched the landscape of Alberta out the window, lost in his own thoughts. Where they had arrived in Canada under a brilliant blue sky yesterday, the sunset faded to an overcast sky. For a little while it snowed, and Sören worried about winter weather conditions shutting down roads, but they pressed on without a problem.

While there were still trees, there were also stretches of flat land, the beginnings of the Canadian prairie. It reminded Sören a bit of driving in remote parts of Iceland, but that unsettled him rather than comforted him right now, having the strange nagging feeling for whatever reason that they weren't going to be returning to Iceland. He chalked it up to paranoia, the adrenaline surges and crashes yesterday, a day that seemed to go on forever and where his entire world had been rocked by his brother's disappearance. It was easy to catastrophize when that had hit them so suddenly, it was easy to feel like nothing would be safe, that everything would change abruptly. And yet...

Sören gave a shuddery sigh, tears stinging his eyes. *Dag.* He wondered where he was - who had taken him, and why. He'd already felt guilty enough about the distance between them, not seeing him enough over the years. Now he was filled with all the regret of what could have been, what he could have done differently to keep in better touch, travel and get together more often.

MI6 will find him and get him back, Sören tried to tell himself. *You're acting like he's dead.*

But Sören tried to reach out across their Force bond - they'd been able to exchange thoughts, touch, across an ocean. There had always been that presence on the other end and now there was just... emptiness. Like Dag was *gone*. Sören didn't want to think the worst, but there it was just the same.

He tried to distract himself with happier thoughts, wondering how much of Canada that his brother had seen. He knew that Dag loved Canada enough to live here for over a decade, that Dag considered it his home even more than Iceland had been his home, if Dag was asked what he was he'd answer "Canadian" before he'd answer "Icelandic". He wished Dag was here with them now, taking this road trip, looking at all the snow.

Huan gave a pitiful whine, as if he knew what Sören was thinking, and he put his hind legs on Sören's shoulders and began to lick Sören's face.

They took their first rest stop at a Tim Horton's, which also made Sören think of Dag, who'd affectionately referred to "Tim's", a big fan of their coffee and donuts, enough to post selfies of himself at "Tim's" before Charlie had told them to stop posting pictures of themselves online, especially on social media. Sören had coffee and a cruller donut in honor of his brother; Dooku put an arm around Sören in the booth and stroked his curls, seeming to know how upset he was.

After the stop at Tim Horton's - getting extra coffee, Sören could see why Dag loved the coffee - they got back on the highway. Now Sören attempted to sketch, starting a sketch of Dag, but it ended up making him too sad and he stopped, burying his face in his hands. That feeling of hopelessness returned, and Sören cried silently.

I have to push through this, if only for the sake of my daughters.

There it was again - not even "goddaughters", but "daughters". Sören wondered what was going on with that, beyond the sinking feeling he had that Dag wasn't going to be found anytime soon and he'd be taking care of the girls for awhile if not indefinitely. And then his heart started racing a little, wondering if on a deeper soul level the part of him that was

Fëanor was acknowledging that the girls were *his* - sired by Finrod, in this lifetime, but nonetheless his, two of the seven sons returned in female bodies.

Carrie and Maedelle. One was dark-haired, one was redhaired. Matt had named Carrie after a friend of his, and Maedelle had been named for Dag and Matt's late housekeeper who had fussed over them like a mother, but nonetheless... *Caranthir and Maedhros?* Sören wondered. It somehow didn't feel right - not that his sons couldn't be reborn as girls, but...

Sören made a mental note to ask Gandalf when they came to Thunder Bay - Olórin would know for sure if they were Elves reborn, and if so, who.

–

As the day wore on, Sören began to see signs that they were heading for Edmonton. Finally, in the afternoon Maglor pulled onto AB-15. "We're in Mundare," Maglor said, consulting the GPS on the satellite phone. "We're stopping here for petrol and food, then we'll be making camp at Elk Island National Park, which is about thirty kilometers west of here."

Near the Essos petrol station, as Sören got out to stretch his legs, he saw what looked like an interesting giant sculpture, shaped like an irregular oval made of tubes, hollow in the middle. He decided to walk over and take a look; Dooku followed him.

The sculpture turned out to be the world's largest garlic sausage, according to the nearby plaque - a tribute to the Ukrainian community in Mundare - and Sören looked up and up at the two ends of it pressed together, like two cockheads, and lost it, screaming with laughter. Dooku raised an eyebrow at Sören's reaction and then when he saw what it was, he facepalmed.

"Well, this was the most appropriate place for us to take a stop," Sören said. "Being we've got our own little sausage fest going..."

"Dear god."

Sören knew Letitia didn't want them posting pictures of themselves online, but he still needed to have *some* souvenir of this trip for posterity and this seemed like the best time for it. "Here," Sören said, shoving his cell phone at Dooku. "I need some pics."

Dooku gave him a look.

"Come on," Sören said. "Tolkien's history has me painted as the biggest dick of all time... and here's the world's biggest sausage..."

"You know..."

"Come on, Ñolo, *pllllllleeeeeease*..."

With a deep breath and an eyeroll - Sören could tell from the way Dooku's eyes lit up and crinkled at the corners that he found this funny too, even if he didn't want to - Dooku stepped back a few feet and took a picture of Sören at the giant sausage. Then Sören took Huan's tiara out of his pocket – he'd packed it in case they needed “emergency lulz” - and he put it on his head, striking a pose with two middle fingers raised. Dooku took

another photo, and stepped further back to get all of the giant sausage in the picture.

When he came back up to Sören, he showed Sören the latest photo. "You are incorrigible," he said.

"I know," Sören said, and with that he put an arm around Dooku and kissed Dooku's cheek, and with his free hand he raised the camera and took two selfies of them in that affectionate moment at the giant sausage, Dooku's grumpy, long-suffering expression in the first photo and then the little smile in the second photo seeming to encapsulate their relationship perfectly.

Sören took off the tiara and put it back in his coat pocket and they made their way back to Maglor, who had filled the tank of gas and gave them a look. "What kind of mischief did you two get into?"

Sören showed him the pictures on the phone. "It's the world's largest sausage."

Maglor leaned against the van, wheezing. "Dammit, Sören..."

They ate at a Chinese restaurant - Sören felt guilty about leaving Huan in the van, making sure to bundle him up in blankets before they went inside. The food was pretty good, with large portions, and between the laughter at the giant sausage and the cozy atmosphere of the restaurant Sören relaxed a little, his mind temporarily away from their troubles. They had a pot of green tea with their meal, and Maglor encouraged Sören to have the tea. "It'll make you feel better," Maglor said, rubbing Sören's hand across the table.

With a full belly, warm from the tea and a cuddly, cozy dog on his lap, Sören dozed off a little on the ride to Elk Island National Park and then they were there. The sun was starting to set as they unloaded their van and started lugging their toboggans, flashlights ready for the coming dark. "According to Google there are herds of bison and moose and elk in here," Maglor whispered. "Also, black bears and timber wolves, so we need to be careful."

"Wouldn't the bears be hibernating?" Sören hissed.

"Exactly why we need to be careful. We don't want to wake them up."

Great, something else to be worried about."Yeah, bad enough we have a grumpy bear right here." Sören reached out to skritch Dooku's beard.

The sun setting in the park took Sören's breath away - the sky blazing melon and violet, washing through to peach, lavender and gold, amid boreal forest and aspens and grassland. As awful as the circumstances had been that led them here, Sören nonetheless was grateful for the chance to see this part of the world, his horror at the tragedy that had shaken his family briefly relieved by the wonder in the presence of nature, as if the land itself were offering him some comfort, some assurance that life would go on, somehow, some way. Sören had chills and he couldn't resist stopping for a moment to take some pictures, wanting to preserve this memory.

"We have to keep moving and get this tent pitched," Maglor said.

"That's what he said."

Sören could tell that Maglor was using his Elven senses to scout as they pulled their toboggans, to make sure they wouldn't have a nasty surprise with camping near a den of

wolves. At last Maglor nodded and stopped. "Here," he said.

They pitched the tent, brought their bedding and other gear inside, and then set to work making a campfire outside the tent. Before Maglor could light a lighter, Sören held up a hand. "I need to practice," he said.

Sören stared at the firewood and concentrated, pushing with the Force, and after a moment where he started to feel a headache coming on, the fire sprang to life. Sören fell back onto the snow, breathing hard, watching the campfire roar before them. It was his strongest fire yet, which meant he was getting better at this - a power he hadn't even realized he had until recently, even if it should have been more obvious with him being Fëanor reborn - and Sören felt a little glow of pride. When Sören sat up again, Maglor put an arm around him and patted his shoulder.

Huan was fed and given water, and that was their cue to drink water as well. Some water was set near the campfire to warm for sponge bathing later. Then Maglor passed around a flask of whisky, which was not Sören's favorite thing in the world but the warmth was pleasant in the winter night.

Maglor had also brought marshmallows, which made Sören grin, feeling like a big kid as they roasted marshmallows over the campfire. Dooku looked fairly disapproving. "You mean to tell me you've gotten through seven decades of life and you've never had a goddamn toasted marshmallow?" Sören asked.

"As you know, I am not much of one for junk food -"

Sören stuffed a toasted marshmallow in Dooku's mouth, silencing him. Sören giggled as he watched Dooku's whiskers get sticky, and Sören leaned in and groomed his beard with his tongue like a cat or a dog. Then Sören put a toasted marshmallow in his mouth and kissed Dooku with it. They both moaned into the kiss, and as Sören leaned on Dooku's shoulder under a blanket - now Dooku was toasting a marshmallow himself - Sören's libido started to stir. They'd all been too exhausted physically and emotionally to even think of sex yesterday, and now Sören found himself craving that comfort, the beauty of the wild landscape and the tender moment between them making his craving all the stronger.

A few marshmallows and nips of whisky later, Maglor took out his war harp from the case. Sören's breath caught again at the sea of stars above them, which was the perfect ambiance for a star of the House of Fëanor... the Song himself, and what was this wild, magical place if not part of the Music made manifest.

Maglor flexed his gloved hands and did scales, and then he performed a song from the late 1980s, something befitting the gothic "Alejandro" persona. His rich, crystalline tenor accompanied the shimmering harp:

Sometimes when this place gets kind of empty
Sound of their breath fades with the light
I think about the loveless fascination
Under the Milky Way tonight

Lower the curtain down in Memphis
Lower the curtain down all right
I got no time for private consultation
Under the Milky Way tonight

Wish I knew what you were looking for
Might have known what you would find

And it's something quite peculiar
Something that's shimmering and white
It leads you here despite your destination
Under the Milky Way tonight

Under the Milky Way tonight

Sören got choked up, remembering the nightly ritual he and Dag had as small children to go out and say goodnight to the moon and the stars. Dag's fascination with space had begun when he was only four years old, wanting to be a scientist even then, maybe work at NASA someday - which he did indeed do for a short time; he had been a candidate for payload specialist at one point, but had never gone into space.

Despite all of Sören's lifelong insecurities growing up under the shadow of his genius brother while Sören couldn't make it past his medical internship and spent years working as a barista, his art considered a "hobby" by most people rather than an all-consuming passion, Sören was nonetheless fiercely proud of his twin brother the astrophysicist. He admired and respected Dag's insatiable curiosity about the mysteries of the universe, his willingness to risk criticism from others in the scientific community - most notably Richard Dawkins - to explore controversial ideas like alien visitation and the existence of parallel universes. He admired the way Dag taught physics to his students, had given lectures and even TED Talks about his theories and insights.

He thought of Dag now - the scientist, in love with the world in the same way he was but expressing it much differently - and he wondered if Dag at least got to see the night sky wherever he was being held, and the thought of Dag being prisoner somewhere tore at him. The tears spilled silently, but Dooku felt it and pulled Sören closer, and now Dooku was offering him a roasted marshmallow, another nip of whisky.

Sören's eyes met Maglor's, and Maglor reached out to pat Sören, tousle his curls. Maglor felt it too, and he eased from "Under the Milky Way Tonight" to "Grace", a Jeff Buckley song from the 1990s - Sören's first impression when he'd heard Maglor sing, as "Alejandro", back in 2009 was that he sounded a bit like Jeff Buckley but even better. Maglor's fingers flew over the harp and his voice soared:

There's the moon asking to stay
Long enough for the clouds to fly me away
Oh, it's my time coming,
I'm not afraid
Afraid to die

My fading voice sings of love,
But she cries to the clicking of time.
Of time

Wait in the fire.
Wait in the fire.
Wait in the fire.
Wait in the fire.
The fire.

And she weeps on my arm

Walking to the bright lights in sorrow
Oh drink a bit of wine
We both might go tomorrow
Oh my love

And the rain is falling,
I believe my time has come
It reminds me of the pain
I might leave
Leave behind

Wait in the fire.
Wait in the fire.
Wait in the fire.
Wait in the fire.
The fire.

It reminds me of the pain
I might leave
Leave behind

And I feel them drown my name
So easy to know and forget with this kiss
I'm not afraid to go but it goes so slow

Wait in the fire.
Wait in the fire.
Wait in the fire.
Wait in the fire.
Wait in the fire.
Wait in the fire.
Wait in the fire.
Wait in the fire.

Sören's tears weren't silent anymore. He had gooseflesh under his heavy winter clothing from Maglor's song. It was so tempting to just give up and die, but they had all been waiting in the fire, and it was the fire that seized him now, reaching out for Maglor to grab him, kiss him hard. They needed to feel alive...

The campfire was snuffed out and the three went into the tent, taking the warmed-up water for bathing with them. Sören took out the Silmaril tiara, which heated up the tent nicely, making it safe to undress.

The bath water was poured into two basins, one with soap added and one without. Maglor was washed first, the back of him then the front, with Sören sponging the soapy water onto Maglor and scrubbing in slow, sensual circles, Dooku sponging the plain water for rinsing, lazily rubbing back and forth. Sören and Dooku smiled at Maglor's hard cock jolting beneath their touch, and shared a kiss, wickedly plotting across their Force bond.

Maglor had wicked thoughts as well - Dooku was next, stretching out onto his stomach, and Maglor scrubbed the back of him while Sören rinsed. Dooku sighed and moaned as they took care of him, as much of a massage as it was a bath, washing away the tension as well as freshening him up. As they worked on him together Sören and Maglor kissed, and Sören trailed kisses along Dooku's spine, laughing softly at the way he shivered, breathing harder, moaning louder. When Dooku rolled onto his front Sören licked his lips

at the sight of the hard cock, already dripping precum. Maglor and Sören got even more slow and deliberate with their sponging, watching as Dooku broke out in gooseflesh, looking at them with pleading eyes. After Dooku's chest was washed, Sören licked the damp chest hair, stole licks at his nipples, pebbling them. When Dooku's cock was sponged clean, Sören licked at that too until Maglor pulled him off, chuckling.

"Now now... we still have to wash you, Ada," Maglor said, heat in his eyes as he pushed Sören onto his stomach.

Sören was already hard as he lay down, and wiggled his ass, whimpering with desperate need as Maglor and Dooku lavished love on him, Dooku soaping Sören and Maglor rinsing, the two of them kissing and licking each freshly clean inch of his shoulders and back. His cock stiffened even more and his balls tightened as tension melted out of the rest of him, his body electric with each caress, each kiss. When Sören stretched out on his back he couldn't help but stroke himself idly, which made Maglor playfully slap his hand away. "Not yet, Ada," Maglor husked. "We have to wash that, too."

But they took their sweet time getting there, Dooku soaping and Maglor rinsing again, from his shoulders down to his chest and stomach and thighs, the two continuing to kiss and lick where the sponge had been. Sören bucked and arched to them, panting, as they lapped and suckled his nipples at the same time, played with the nipple rings, and his moans got even louder as they kissed and nibbled on his stomach and thighs, Sören's body sensitized from the sponge bath and the pent-up need, their teasing almost too delicious to bear. Most delicious of all was when they washed his cock, and nuzzled the bush, breathing in the scent of him before two tongues lashed at his cock from the head down the shaft and back up. Sören thrashed underneath them, moaning, gasping, begging "please... please..."

The teasing intensified as Dooku took Sören's cock into his mouth and Maglor's tongue pushed into the fresh, clean puckered hole, finding that sweet spot in him right away and swirling his tongue slowly, sensually, kissing it. Sören screamed, right on that edge of climax, so badly needing to come, and they kept him there, Dooku's eyes fierce as he watched Sören lose himself in sensation and passion, Maglor murmuring into Sören with pleasure.

Just before Sören could come, they stopped. Sören howled with frustration. Maglor laughed as Dooku pulled him into a kiss, the two of them teasing Sören even more by kissing each other, hands sliding over each other, hard cocks rubbing together as they sat face-to-face. They drove Sören mad when Dooku took his and Maglor's cocks into his hand and stroked them slowly, as Dooku kissed and licked and nibbled Maglor's neck, Maglor moaning and panting, every now and again stealing sultry glances at Sören, enjoying Sören's lust at the show playing out before him.

"If you two don't fuck me, I'm going to fucking die," Sören growled.

Dooku couldn't resist and he stopped kissing Maglor's neck long enough to say, "Hello, Going To Fucking Die, I'm -"

Sören used the Force to hurl a pillow at him, with a roar. Dooku chuckled and threw it back at him just before he leaned and pushed Maglor back a little, to draw one of Maglor's nipples into his mouth.

Sören couldn't stand it anymore. "You two get over here and fuck me right now."

Dooku rolled his eyes. "Twist my arm," he said sarcastically.

"I'll twist something, all right," Sören shot back.

As much as Sören threw off a lot of body heat, and the gift of immortality had changed his physiology enough to give him greater immunity to the cold, and Sören was in the flush of arousal, and the Silmarils were warming the tent, it was still below zero outside and they were naked; they needed some more warmth now. Sören unzipped his sleeping bag and watched with frustration as Maglor took a few minutes to unzip their sleeping bags and zip them together into one large sleeping bag that could fit the three of them - frustration intensified as Dooku began kissing Sören's neck the way he'd been kissing Maglor's, reached to play with Sören's cock. When the sleeping bags were ready Maglor got in, and then Sören and Dooku got in, Sören in the middle, and Dooku zipped them up and pulled the blankets over them.

They settled into position, laying on their sides, with Dooku behind Sören, and Sören and Maglor laying face-to-face; Maglor hooked a leg around Sören. Dooku used the Force to pull the bottle of lubricant out from his knapsack, making Sören giggle as it floated over, and then his giggle became a gasp as the cold liquid poured into him. He gasped again - this time with pleasure - as Dooku's cock rubbed in the crack of his ass, both to get coated with the lube and to tease them both further.

The bottle of lube quickly warmed in Sören's hand, and he poured some onto his fingers, reached under the covers for Maglor's opening. Maglor moaned as Sören pushed one finger inside, then two, then three, rubbing that spot inside him, readying him to be stretched and filled. Sören poured lube over his own cock and Dooku reached around to stroke Sören's cock, get it ready for their lover.

Sören gave a shuddery sigh as he sank into Maglor's silken heat, the feel of Maglor's channel kissing his cock almost enough to send him over the edge right away. He and Maglor kissed deeply, hands roaming, searching, exploring, playing over each other's bodies under the covers as Sören took his first few thrusts, slow and sweet, trying to hold his orgasm back a little longer. It got more difficult to do as Dooku pushed into him from behind, Dooku's arms tight around him as he kissed and nibbled the back of Sören's neck and shoulder, exquisitely sensitive.

Sören and Dooku found a rhythm together, Sören pushing into Maglor as Dooku pulled out of Sören, Dooku pushing into Sören as he pulled out of Maglor. The three lost themselves in the slow, languid lovemaking, the dreamlike haze of sensuality, that feeling of love and belonging.

They moved harder, faster, Maglor and Sören's kisses more feverish, Sören's hand stroking Maglor's cock in time with their thrusts, Dooku leaning over Sören's shoulder to kiss Maglor, Dooku tilting Sören's face to claim his mouth. Their cries rose and fell; their flesh slapped together, sleeping bag rustling. Sören felt himself sweating, almost too hot for comfort...

...and yet, this was comfort, sharing passion underneath the warm covers in their tent. Whatever they had lost out there in the world, they had each other, clinging together - fused together, winding that bond between them ever tighter, stronger.

"Ada," Maglor called out as he climaxed, hot seed shooting over Sören's stomach.

Sören let go with a sob as he gave in to Maglor's pulsing, throbbing channel, spending into him, relief flooding through him, the ache of loving and being loved during a time like this. He cried with deeper relief, deeper love as Dooku came in him, teeth savage on the

back of his neck, sweet possession.

No matter what, we have this, Dooku spoke into Sören's mind, tilting his head again to take a kiss.

Sören smiled against his mouth. *I love you, Ñolo.*

Sören dozed off not long after that; he was vaguely aware of Maglor putting a blanket over the Silmaril tiara to darken the tent, and Maglor added another couple layers of blankets over them. Then Maglor's lips pressed Sören's forehead. "Rest, Ada."

_

In the middle of the night Sören had another nightmare about Dag, this one about him being dragged off, desperately screaming for Sören and reaching out to him as he was pulled along the ground, and Sören tried to run after him and was yanked back in place by that invisible chain again...

...the invisible chain that restrained the Fenrir-wolf, in mythology.

As much as Sören didn't want to disturb his partners, he had to pee when he woke up from that nightmare, and the cold sweat from his nightmare meant it was a good idea to get dressed now. He used the Force to pull over the fresh change of clothes he'd set out for the morning and after he was dressed, he stepped out of the tent.

The aurora borealis greeted him - Sören gasped as he watched the intense green and violet weaving and swirling in the sky, with dashes of gold. Then he gasped again as he saw a couple of bison grazing nearby - a large one and two smaller ones, probably the larger one's babies. He tried not to squeak, not wanting to frighten them off. He'd never seen bison before outside of documentaries on TV and photos in magazines, and he was entranced, watching them peacefully grazing under the aurora. It was one of the most magical moments of his life, outside of finding the Silmarils - it felt almost like a sign.

Sören's bladder nagged him again and he did his business and wiped, eyes riveted on the bison and the shimmering aurora. Finally the cold and his fatigue got the better of him and he reluctantly went back in the tent and got under the covers.

_

The alarm went off at seven AM again. Sören wanted to throw it across the tent, even though he was arguably better-rested than he had been last night; after his nightmare, he'd slept pretty soundly following his bathroom break and seeing the bison under the aurora, which felt almost like it had happened in a dream and he would have thought he'd dreamt it except he woke fully dressed.

After getting ready, they began to clear the tent, and once again, Sören saw bison - this time there were four adults and two young, quietly grazing in the twilight several meters away. Sören squeaked and clapped his hands like an excited big kid, then he facepalmed, not wanting to disturb them with his noise. One of the large bisons looked over at him, snorted, and then went back to what it was doing like it didn't care. Maglor smirked.

Hauling the toboggans all the way back to the van was a pain, and Sören was already tired out again by the time they got there, but it had been worth it to see the bison. Sören found himself smiling as they loaded up the back of the van.

Maglor was in a mellow mood, so the ambient playlist went on, with Cocteau Twins and Enya and Enigma playing as the deep blue twilight faded to pink and gold dawn. With the music and Sören's lingering fatigue he was half-asleep in the back seat, every now and again stirring as he felt Huan shift position next to him, and he'd look out the window again at the Canadian landscape whizzing past. They entered Saskatchewan and Sören woke up enough to give another half-dead "WOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOO" at another province cleared.

What Sören noticed now was that the land was suddenly a lot more flat - there had been fewer trees in Alberta as they drove through, compared to the Northwest Territories, and now it was all flat, the Canadian prairie. The sky was a dull grey color and there was a bit of fog, which gave the drive a melancholy feeling, and was also a bit eerie, as if something ominous was brewing. But then Sören's pensive mood lightened when he saw the road signs, announcing Trans-Canada Highway / Saskatoon / Prince Albert.

"Hold the fuck up, there's a town called PRINCE ALBERT?" Sören hollered, thinking of his piercing.

Dooku facepalmed and Maglor snickered. Then Maglor shot him a look in the rearview mirror. "That's in the opposite direction of where we're going, Ada."

—

They took their first rest stop in Saskatoon just before noon, at another Tim Horton's. After their stop they drove through Saskatoon, with businesses on either side of the SK-16 highway. They took the exit towards Yorkton, and merged back onto the Trans-Canada Highway. They made their stop for the night hours later in Yorkton, having dinner at a nice steakhouse before driving around to find a campground; Maglor saved a little bit of steak as a treat for Huan, sitting bundled up in the van while they were away.

They were a lot more in civilization tonight than they had been last night, the sky wasn't as clear, no wild animals as far as they could tell, but there was still nonetheless a peaceful feeling as they made camp and sat out under the night sky, roasting marshmallows and drinking whisky around the campfire again. Maglor played instrumental songs on the harp - some familiar songs they recognized, classical music and more contemporary pieces, like Enya.

Sören started to doze off, lulled by the sound of the harp, and he was aware of Dooku picking him up and carrying him into the tent. Snuggled between Maglor and Dooku, Sören fell asleep, and this time there were no nightmares. He dreamed of his mother, and of him and his siblings and cousin playing in the snow.

He was woken up in the middle of the night by a cold emptiness under the covers, which startled him. Maglor wasn't there, and for the briefest instant Sören panicked, worrying that he too had been taken from him somehow. And then he heard the strains of Maglor's harp, and Maglor singing in Quenya - he recognized the *Noldolantë*, beautiful and

haunting, mournful.

Sören stepped out of the tent and saw the aurora in the sky again, burning green fire, this time with flashes of pink. He sat beside Maglor to listen to the *Noldolantë* - the Song of the Song - and watch the aurora. Even though they weren't quite in a private place, Maglor had dropped his glamour for the time being, hair flooding to his thighs, glowing silver. Even though Sören was loath to deprive the tent of its nightlight and an additional source of warmth he used the Force to grab one of the two Silmarils, and sit with it. It felt like the right thing to do.

Maglor looked at him, and Sören could hear there was a new part of the song now, that had been added after the more recent addition of the memorium of those who had perished in the Dagorath. Sören didn't understand a word he was singing and yet he *knew* it. Maglor was singing to him as the reborn King of the Noldor, who would rise and reclaim what was theirs, who burned like the fire in the sky they were watching now, shining through the darkness. Sören's eyes filled with tears, and he felt the Silmaril pulsing in his hand, responding to the song, to Maglor's voice. Sören could feel it then - this was a form of magic for Maglor, this was his show of Power, that this wasn't just a new verse of the *Noldolantë* but he was singing a spell, a charm to protect and strengthen Sören in the days ahead.

Force knows I'll need it. Sören swallowed hard.

Huan whined and pawed at the door of the tent, and Sören brought him outside. He and Maglor had water while they watched Huan go, and then at last Maglor packed up his harp and followed Huan and Sören back into the tent. Huan wanted to snuggle with them, which was fine by Sören, and for a few minutes, laying there between Maglor and Dooku with Huan laying across Sören and Maglor under a little blanket of his own, the Silmarils glowing on them from across the tent, Sören could almost believe that somehow, things would work out.

Chapter 19

It was snowing when they woke up the next morning and packed up the tent and their gear. Maglor drove slowly, carefully on the highway, and so it took them closer to five hours to get from Yorkton to Winnipeg, rather than the little-over-four hours projected by Google Maps. As they cleared Saskatchewan and entered Manitoba, Sören gave another half-hearted "wooooooo"; he was getting antsy, wanting to just get to Thunder Bay already and get his nieces.

Watching the snow fall on the Canadian prairie as they drove also once again made Sören feel melancholy, a sense of mourning. He also felt uneasy, knowing how winter weather conditions could close roads. He felt just about ready to cry when they took a rest stop in Winnipeg, hitting Tim Horton's for coffee.

To help cheer Sören up, Dooku got him a hot chocolate in addition to the usual coffee, knowing how much Sören liked hot cocoa. Sören leaned on him in the booth, and Dooku pet Sören's curls, the Force radiating in his touch. Maglor watched their moment of tenderness with a little smile on his face and then he reached across the table, took Sören's hands and kissed them.

"Soon," Maglor said. "This time tomorrow you'll have your goddaughters."

"I worry something else will go wrong." Sören looked out the window at the snow falling. "Like we'll get stuck somewhere -"

Maglor shook his head. "I promise you, we are going to get those girls."

It was another seven and a half hours from Winnipeg to Thunder Bay, and they could only make part of that today. But Maglor still drove a little faster once they left Tim Horton's, putting on the metal playlist to get himself in the zone with driving and try to get Sören's spirits up some more. When Metallica came on, Maglor turned it up and he, Dooku and Sören threw the horns.

Hey (hey)
I'm your life
I'm the one who takes you there
Hey (hey)
I'm your life
I'm the one who cares
They (they)
They betray
I'm your only true friend now
They (they)
They'll betray
I'm forever there

I'm your dream, make you real
I'm your eyes when you must steal
I'm your pain when you can't feel
Sad but true

Just as Maglor turned from the Provincial Trunk Highway onto the Trans-Canada Highway, Maglor said, "Oh, *shiiiiiiiiiiiit*."

That didn't sound good at all. Then Sören heard sirens; he looked in the rear-view mirror and saw a Royal Canadian Mounted Police car was right behind them. Maglor pulled over.

"OK," Maglor said. "Everyone, keep calm. Nicolae, you're French again, and Sören, pretend to be asleep. I'll handle this."

Sören used the Force to pull up blankets over himself, and he closed his eyes, but he definitely wasn't asleep - he listened, heart racing, worrying that they were about to be taken away somewhere in connection with whatever happened with Dag.

"Good afternoon, sir," Maglor said, turning down the music.

"Good afternoon. You know how fast you were going?"

"Oh, crap. I'm really sorry," Maglor said, and Sören noticed he said "sore-ree". "I was goin' a bit over the speed limit, eh?"

"Not by much, but we have a slower speed limit in these conditions, son."

"Oh no. I'm sorry." There it was again, the "sore-ree". "I'm usually a lot more careful, but my uncle and I here were arguin' about hockey again..." Sören noticed he pronounced it "a-boat".

"*Criss de câlice de tabarnak de marde*," Dooku swore.

"Uncle Jacques, calm down, eh?"

The Mountie chuckled from outside the van.

"Am I in trouble, sir? Do you need me to step out of the van?" He said "oat". "Show my license and registration, that sort of thing? I'm kinda in a rush to get home..." Maglor gave a nervous little laugh. "My uncle's in a mood, and I gotta go to the bathroom, and my cousin back there don't feel so good."

Sören made a little whiny moan, and opened his eyes just a little to squint - he'd never seen a Mountie before, just on TV. He was disappointed that the Mountie wasn't wearing a red uniform or the hat, but was wearing blue like any other police officer around the world. He closed his eyes.

Then Maglor laughed again. "I got coffee from Tim's if you want to look the other way..."

The Mountie laughed too. "No bribes, son. Look, I won't make you go to all that trouble, I won't write you up for a ticket this time, just drive slower when you get on the road again, eh?"

"Will do, sir. Again, I'm sorry, and thank you so much."

"Thank you for your compliance, son."

"You have a nice day, eh?"

"You too."

Sören heard Maglor roll the window back up, and when Maglor said, "He's gone," Sören opened his eyes. Then he gasped when he saw Maglor's right hand holding a Glock pistol under a pile of Tim Horton's napkins; Maglor took a few deep breaths, shaking.

"*Maglor.*" Sören blinked, not able to believe it, and yet, believe it he had to, looking at the Glock again. "Were you gonna shoot -"

"Look, Sören, I wouldn't have shot the guy for no reason, but after what happened with Dag, if it looked like we were going to get arrested I would have shot him." Before Sören could protest, Maglor went on, "I know you don't like it, but the training wheels are off now. We had some peace and quiet for awhile, but that was a false sense of security - this is our life. We do what we have to do to survive - or keep ourselves from a fate worse than death - even when it's ugly and questionable." Maglor put the pistol back in the glove compartment and pulled back onto the road. "And it's not just the three of us we have to think about now, either. It's those girls. We have to look after them, protect them."

Sören shivered. He understood what Maglor was saying - he still didn't like it, the Mountie was just doing his job and seemed pleasant enough - but he understood it just the same.

And he realized that as much as the idea of shooting someone in cold blood bothered him, he was also bothered by Maglor being so *casual* about it. He knew that Maglor was capable of killing, and had killed, many times over, but it was one thing to know it was a part of his past and another thing to see it demonstrated in the present. How quickly Maglor could switch gears from being perfectly pleasant and warm and loving, to the cold, ruthless kill-or-be-killed predator. This was a part of Maglor he had to accept, and it bothered him a little that he *was* accepting it, that he understood the terrible necessity of their situation and what they might have to do in the days, weeks, months ahead to keep from going the same way as his brother.

What bothered him most of all was that Maglor had gotten that killer instinct from*him*. Compared to Fingolfin and Finarfin, Fëanor had been less of an obvious warrior, and yet Fëanor had been a warrior in his own right. Fëanor had killed. And as Sören was Fëanor reborn, there was a part of him that was a killer. Sören himself had killed, once - his uncle Einar, fourteen years ago; he'd Force choked Einar to death before Einar could rape and kill Margrét.

Sören tried to push it out of his mind. He reached for his sketchbook, but he couldn't concentrate. He curled up with Huan, watching the snow fall harder. When the GPS announced that they were now in Ontario, Sören gave another "wooooooooooo".

"OK, we should touch base with Olórin now," Maglor said, "make sure he's still in Thunder Bay. I shouldn't be on the phone and drive at the same time -"

"I'll do it." Sören used the Force to reach for the satellite phone; they had programmed Olórin's burner as number 3 on their speed dial. Sören waited three rings, and then Olórin's voice came over the line. "Hello?"

"Hi," Sören said. "We just crossed the Ontario border."

"Good. How has your journey been so far?"

"Cold," Sören said, thinking again of Maglor ready to shoot the Mountie. "It's snowing pretty hard right now. You still in Thunder Bay?"

"That I am."

"We won't make it there tonight but we'll be there tomorrow..."

"Early afternoon," Maglor called from the front seat.

"Early afternoon. We need an address of where we're going," Sören said.

"Yes," Olórin said. "We have a bit of a conundrum here, as I have reservations giving that information over a cell phone... who knows who might be listening in..."

"*Palantir*?" Sören asked. "Did we even bring the *palantir*..."

"Not that either, I don't want to risk a surprise visit from you-know-who, on the odd chance he'd be interested in these girls. Nothing like a wizard battle to be even more conspicuous..."

Sören couldn't blame him for that - he found himself perversely amused that Sauron had been referred to as You-Know-Who, the same epithet given Voldemort in the *Harry Potter* series - but he was also feeling a small prickle of irritation. "OK, well, how are we going to find you?"

There was a pause, then Olórin said, "Is Macalaurë driving?"

"Yes."

"Tell him to take a stop in Kenora, you ought to see the Max the Moose statue. Tell him I said it's worth seeing."

Sören relayed the message.

It took a little under two hours for them to get to Kenora. The snow was really coming down, and Maglor seemed a bit disgruntled at being sent on "a wild moose chase," he muttered, looking up Max the Moose on GPS.

When they got there the sun was setting, and Sören wanted another photo opportunity, both of the giant moose statue and the art bench nearby. Just as Sören was taking a selfie, a shadow fell over him and he looked up. There was an eagle soaring overhead.

The eagle swooped down on top of the moose statue's head - it had something in its beak, and dropped it on the ground. Dooku stooped to pick it up, a rolled-up piece of paper. The paper contained the directions to where Olórin was staying in Thunder Bay.

Sören's jaw dropped - this was a bit surreal. Chills went through him.

Before he could take a picture of the eagle sitting on the statue - not a sight seen every day - the eagle flew off.

They stopped for dinner at a bar and grill, and then on the way back to the van Maglor said, "I think instead of camping it's going to be safer to do a hotel. Not necessarily because of the cold, but I don't want to run the risk of good Samaritans trying to rescue us in the snow, or another run-in with Mounties..."

Sören couldn't fault his logic, though they had to try more than one hotel before they found somewhere that would allow them to bring the dog, and once they did they were given a strange and somewhat disapproving look at three men sharing a hotel room

together, even though they weren't advertising being a poly triad. Sören felt uncomfortable, and not a small amount paranoid, having the sudden mad fear that whatever happened to Dag now meant that they were wanted.

The anticipation of picking up his goddaughters, the reflection on how his life would change as he was suddenly thrown into a parent role, the worry that he wouldn't be a fit guardian - he had no idea how to take care of babies - as well as the adrenaline of the earlier encounter with the Mountie and Sören's paranoia that just before they could get to the girls, the Feds would come crashing their hotel door down, kept Sören awake that night. He tried to get to sleep, but he kept tossing and turning, and got up several times to pace with all the nervous energy coursing through him.

By five AM Maglor and Dooku were up too, two hours ahead of the alarm. It was still dark outside. They took turns in the shower - a hot shower felt good, after going close to a week without. But the shower also exhausted Sören... not enough to fall asleep when they got in the van, however.

They stopped for coffee at Tim Horton's and then they were on their way. After the stretch of the Canadian prairie it was nice to see trees again as they drove through Ontario, and Sören tried to relax between the peace of the winter forest and Maglor once again putting on the ambient playlist, sensing how keyed up Sören was. But Sören still felt like he could jump out of his skin, wired and tired. The six-hour drive felt impossibly long, and Sören started to cry on the last hour, exhausted and nervous and frustrated that they weren't there yet, and even once they had the girls it was a long, long journey home...

The GPS announced Thunder Bay, and then began to recite the directions for the address that had been plugged in for where Olórin was staying. They came to a benign, normal-looking small white house with a station wagon in the driveway; Sören heard a dog barking as they pulled in, which woke up Huan from his nap and got him barking too.

Maglor led the way up the steps to the porch and the front door. He knocked and Sören's heart hammered in his ears. The dog inside came closer to the door, barking louder. A few seconds later the door opened and they saw Olórin, dressed in an off-white sweater and grey sweatpants. He gestured for them to come in.

Sören went right over to the twin bassinets, a sob tearing through him at the sight of his goddaughters.

"Coffee? Tea?" Olórin asked.

"Earl Grey if you've got it," Dooku said.

They sat down when the tea was ready, Olórin on an armchair, the other three across from him on a couch; Sören pulled the bassinets over to where he sat on the comfy grey couch. The girls were waking up now, making a fuss. "They're probably hungry," Olórin said - he'd also heated up two bottles of formula along with the tea. "Do you want to do the honors?"

Sören handed the dark-haired baby to Dooku, and took the redhead into his arms. Sören and Dooku fed the babies while the tea cooled; tears streamed down Sören's face, holding the baby girl in his arms, marveling over her little face, the tiny nose, the tiny fingers and toes. He pet the fuzzy red hair and kissed the top of the baby's head. Looking over at Dooku holding and feeding Carrie made Sören cry even harder at the sweetness of it, the way Dooku completely melted at the baby in his arms. "Hello," Dooku said softly, chucking Carrie's chin as he fed her. "Why, hello there."

Even though the girls weren't his biologically, Sören now understood why new parents talked about the difference in brain chemistry as they bonded with their children, the overwhelming love and the fierce protectiveness. Sören felt overcome by emotion; holding the baby in his arms, and the other safe in Dooku's arms, had made the entire long journey - like a long, difficult labor - worth it.

"I should warn you now," Olórin said, "they've been a bit agitated since the separation. Small though they are, children *know* when something isn't right -"

Now the tears that spilled were for Dag. Sören swallowed hard.

Maglor leaned back on the couch and folded his arms. "I have to ask," Maglor said, "has there been a stink?"

"A missing persons report has been filed," Olórin said, nodding, "not by me. I can only assume by someone at the university, or perhaps one of Dag's neighbors. There's been mention of it on Toronto news sources but it hasn't completely blown up yet. Yet."

"High-profile scientist going missing, it's only a matter of time before that goes national," Maglor said. "Or international."

"Which also attracts attention to his family." Olórin sipped his tea.

Dooku handed Carrie to Maglor so he could work on his tea. Sören started crying all over again at Maglor going from stern and concerned to suddenly gooey at the baby in his arms, talking to her as sweetly as he did Huan. Huan was making friends with Olórin's dog, while Olórin's cats sat on a cat tree looking out the window.

"Letitia told us to stay off the radar during our trip," Sören said. "Though we had to get a hotel last night. We paid cash..."

"If it keeps snowing like it did last night, we're going to have to use hotels on the way back for the sake of the girls," Dooku said. "They'd be affected by the cold much worse than we would be."

Rocking Carrie, Maglor asked, "By any chance, have you done scrying with the*palantir* to see who or what took -"

"I've tried." Olórin let out a deep sigh. "I'm not getting anything, which is alarming. It means there's interference. From who, I don't know. But whatever it is, doesn't want Dag to be found anytime soon, if at all."

"*Jesus.*" Sören broke down sobbing, which made Maedelle cry, which in turn made Carrie cry. Sören immediately felt guilty. "Aw shit, I upset the kids -"

"Shhh, shhhh," Maglor said, petting Carrie. He started to sing: "*Hush little baby, don't say a word, Ada's gonna buy you a mockingbird... if that mockingbird don't sing, Ada's gonna buy you a diamond ring...*"

Dooku snorted, not able to help it. "*Indeed*," he said, sipping his tea.

Sören needed to try to change the subject, knowing the girls could sense how agitated he was - which all but confirmed they were Force sensitive like most of the rest of the family. Maglor continued to sing, which only brought down the squalling a little bit, and then

Sören found his words. "So this is, ah. This is your house?"

"I own a few different houses around the world," Olórin said. "One of them is this one, here in Thunder Bay. I have an... arrangement with the Sleeping Giant. I still thought it prudent to not risk a confrontation with Sauron or the authorities, which is why I preferred to send the directions to you by eagle rather than over your satellite phone or *palantir*."

"Let's be real, you wanted to show off a little." Maglor raised an eyebrow, his lips quirked.

"I admit, Macalaurë, that the opportunities for me to flex my powers are fewer and farther between, but no, I really did feel it was better under current circumstances to err on the side of caution." Olórin's brow furrowed. "Trouble is brewing. I cannot say what, or where - "

"Great," Sören muttered, the paranoia rising again.

"But something else is happening." Olórin shrugged. "However, I feel it is absolutely the right thing that you have these girls."

Sören felt that too - they were calming down now; Maedelle's fist locked around his index finger and Sören's tears once again fell out of love, awe over this tiny little life in his arms.

"Will you be staying the night?" Olórin asked. "I have a guest room..."

Maglor shook his head. "As much as I'd love to stay and get caught up, maybe seek some counsel, we have a very long journey back to the portal in Fort Smith and the sooner we head back the way we came, the sooner we can get home. The sooner we can get these girls home, and try to... pick up the pieces."

"I understand. Can you stay for at least a little while? Let me feed you?"

Maglor looked at the others. "I think we can do that."

Olórin ordered a pizza - the surreality of Gandalf the White ordering a pizza sent Sören into hysterics. As they waited for the pizza to arrive, Olórin showed them where the bathroom was, and when they passed by the washer and dryer in the pantry, Sören asked, "Can we do our laundry here?"

Dooku inevitably chimed in with "May we..."

Sören shot him a look, and Olórin smiled and nodded, patting Sören's shoulder.

The dirty laundry was hauled out from the van, and the wash was started. Now Sören held Carrie as Dooku and Maglor took turns holding Maedelle. When the pizza arrived, Sören fell into hysterics again at the surreality of them eating pizza with Gandalf - the mere concept of Maglor eating pizza.

But then, when they had their fill and Olórin insisted they take the rest with them for the road, Sören felt anxiety about getting back on the road. He felt anxiety about this entire thing, and he realized why.

"I have no idea what I'm fucking doing," Sören choked out through his tears. "I don't even know how to change a diaper..."

"I see," Olórin said.

"I... I never expected to be a parent." Sören felt embarrassed. He felt ashamed, guilty, like he was an unfit guardian, was going to mess up irrevocably, despite his love for these little girls... "And now it's here and I don't know what to do -"

"All right, let's start with... giving you a diaper-changing lesson."

Dooku and Maglor also sat in for the diaper-changing lesson. Olórin gently cleaned Maedelle and changed her diaper as they observed, and then he said to Sören, "Now you."

Sören cleaned Carrie. He felt awkward the entire time, worrying that he would hurt her in some way, like she was a delicate little doll. Then he did the diaper as he had been instructed, and managed to get it right the first time, even as he worked more slowly than Olórin had.

Then Sören lost it again. "I learned... how to change a diaper... from Gandalf." It was too surreal. *That time I ate pizza with Gandalf and he taught me to change a diaper. Right after he had an eagle sit on top of Max the Moose to drop off directions to his house.*

"Don't say I never did anything for you, Fëanáro Finwion." The Maia's eyes twinkled with amusement. Then he folded his arms. "Do you have baby food, formula?"

Sören nodded. "We loaded up on that before we left Iceland. Although..." Sören ran a nervous hand through his curls and rubbed his beard. "I don't know how often to feed them. Like, do I wait till they're crying, or...?"

"Well, they could cry for any number of reasons. Needing their diaper changed. Being startled. Picking up on your distress, or the distress of the situation in general." Olórin looked back at the girls - Maglor and Dooku were dressing them now, bundling them up to go out into the cold - and then back at Sören. "They were born in March, and it's Tuesday, December first, so they're almost nine months old. They need between sixteen to twenty four ounces of formula a day, they also need baby food. I do the airplane when I feed them, sometimes I let them hold the spoon. They should have solid food three times a day."

"How do you know so much about babies, anyway?" Sören asked.

"Google," Olórin said matter-of-factly.

Sören facepalmed, once again feeling like a dumbass. "Jæja, I should have looked stuff up too, but everything's been such chaos..."

"It's completely understandable. Now you know," Olórin said.

"And knowing is half the battle," Maglor muttered as he picked up Carrie.

"What?" Sören asked.

"Never mind," Maglor said. He looked at the clock. "Not to be a party pooper, but that one hotel in Kenora that let us have Huan is the one place I can guarantee we can go with a dog, for the time being, and it's close to six hours back that way so we need to leave as soon as possible."

Sören sighed and nodded. He was reluctant to leave now, feeling like in rushing around

they were potentially missing something important, but they didn't really have a choice, either.

"You'll do fine," Olórin said, patting Sören again. "You were a good father to your sons, and you have that same heart. All new parents worry about getting it wrong, no matter how well-prepared they are, but you care enough that you'll find your way in no time."

"I certainly hope so," Sören said, holding Maedelle, who was burbling. "I'm scared shitless right now."

"Well, is there anything else you need or want to ask me?"

Sören thought for a moment and then he remembered the little note he'd made to himself internally. "Olórin... who are they?" He craned his head towards Maedelle and gestured to Carrie, in Maglor's arms. "I mean, their names sound like Caranthir and Maedhros but that's too obvious, isn't it?"

"Too obvious for Caranthir and Maedhros, yes, but throwing a curveball so you wouldn't guess correctly the first time - a bit of a prank - would be the style of your two youngest," Olórin said with a smile.

"OH MY GOD." Sören felt even more like a dumbass for not having seen it right away; they were twins and everything, albeit fraternal this time. "You mean they're Pitya and Telvo?"

"Yes, they're the Ambarussa." Olórin's smile broadened. He put his hand on Carrie's head. "Amrod." And on Maedelle's. "Amras."

Sören's eyes met Maglor's - Maglor was tearing up now too. Maglor tried to compose himself but his jaw trembled and he held Carrie close for a moment, closing his eyes, silent tears flowing down his cheeks. Dooku put an arm around each of them and he was choked up as well. Sören knew this was a particularly bittersweet moment for him since Qui-Gon had died a little over two months ago, and Leja had terminal cancer and was dying or was already dead. He felt almost bad about it, but Dooku pet Sören's curls and Dooku told him across their bond, *As you know, I always regarded your children as being like my own. So at least two more have returned to us, and that is cause for some celebration.*

Sören swallowed hard. If anything happened to these kids... "Should I ask Loki to make them immortal?"

"*No,*" Maglor said, a bit vehemently. "At least... not yet."

Olórin nodded. "Macalaurë is right. They're still children, if you make them immortal this young, they will be children eternally and that is rather... problematic."

"Oh. Shit. Yeah." Sören realized, and frowned, feeling even more idiotic. "Sorry, I didn't -" He let out a deep sigh. "I'm just, you know. Worrying about something happening..."

"I understand," Maglor said, and Olórin nodded again. "But they're not like our pets."

"No," Olórin said. "And even if there was the chance that they would still age normally until they were young adults, they should be given a choice in the matter, when they are old enough to decide... immortality should not be forced on anyone."

"OK. Fair enough." Sören nodded in agreement. They lingered outside the van, and Sören went fishing. "Olórin? Where's Ara?"

"Now you know I can't tell you that," Olórin said.

"But you know he's around."

"He's around." Olórin nodded. "The only thing I can tell you is that sometimes people and things show up in the least expected places. Right now, concentrate on getting the girls home safe."

"OK."

"One more thing..." Olórin made a "wait here" gesture. He went inside, and then he came back out with a round object wrapped in a cloth. He handed it to Sören, who peeled the cloth back and saw the same dark glass of the *palantir* Maglor owned - the surface of the glass began to swirl with colors underneath, glitter like a snow globe but depicting space. Then the glass went dark again. "It may be a good idea to have two, for whatever reason."

"Where are you going now?" Maglor asked. "Are you staying in Thunder Bay..."

Olórin shook his head. "I'll be leaving Canada soon. I can't disclose where I'm going right now, but our paths will cross again in due time. And later, when it is time for you to fight the Valar..." Olórin bowed his head, a pained expression on his face; Sören could feel how much this hurt, to have his faith and trust in the Valar shattered as it had been. "I will stand with you." He met Sören's eyes, Dooku's, Maglor's. "Galadriel is working from within Valinor, to gather a resistance. It will take some time... but the day of reckoning will come. And hopefully, after that..." Olórin's eyes once again passed along the three of them. "Better gods. More just. But you have a journey to get there, my friends."

"OK." Maglor handed Carrie to Dooku and came forward to hug his old friend. "*Tenna enta lúmë, namárië.* Be well, Olórin."

"*Nai elen siluva lyenna, i arani Eldaron*." He turned to Sören and Dooku, gesturing to the girls. "Keep them safe. Keep *yourselves* safe. Good luck."

Chapter 20

After they left the Maia's safe house in Thunder Bay, Sören had the girls and Huan with him in the back seat. He tried to take a nap after a sleepless night at the hotel, but he kept waking up to make sure the girls were OK, and his brain began to worry once again about whether or not he'd be a good enough parent, if he'd inadvertently end up putting the girls in harm's way or screwing them up mentally. He worried about whatever was interfering with scrying for Dag - he tried to do it himself with the *palantir* and couldn't get anything at all - and also worried about the missing persons report, and how soon it would take for that to gain broader notice... how much he and other members of his family would be recognized.

If Sören thought they had gotten a touch of disapproval as three men sharing a hotel room last night, it was even worse with two babies, who were also fussy by the time they got to the hotel, needing their diapers changed, needing to be fed. After they were changed and fed, they still continued to fuss, and Sören could hear loud complaints in the room adjacent to theirs. Sören tried to sleep again, but he kept worrying that the person complaining would take it to the desk and they'd be kicked out, or even worse, that the police would be called, with how suspicious the person looked at the concept of three men with a baby.

The next few days passed in a haze of Sören riding in the van trying to get what sleep he could, being woken up by crying babies, or being woken up by his own hypervigilance if the babies *weren't* crying and his protective instincts thought they were too quiet and he needed to check to make sure they were still alive.

After the fraught night in the hotel in Kenora, they opted to camp in Yorkton the next night, except that meant Sören didn't sleep at all, his body uncomfortable and achy in a sleeping bag on the ground after two nights in a hotel room bed, aching intensified by not resting well the last couple of days, and every time his body tried to go to sleep he woke up, worried if the girls were warm enough in the tent, needing to check on them. Sören getting out of the sleeping bag every so often to check on the girls meant that Maglor and Dooku kept waking up.

They decided to risk hotels for the rest of the trip, not wanting another night like the last one. To minimize suspicion, they decided to rent separate rooms - Sören and the babies in one, Maglor and Dooku taking another and smuggling in Huan, Dooku using the Force to suggest a distraction to the concierge while Maglor brought Huan past. They reconvened in Sören's room, leaving the other room empty, not just because there was safety in numbers but they needed to stay together, needed the comfort of holding each other, snuggling together.

They also found after the first few rest stops on the way back that, taking the girls into a restaurant, inevitably a random stranger would remark on the babies, complimenting them or asking questions. Sören tried to see it as innocent enough but he remembered Dag being exposed in public thanks to a random stranger, and Letitia's caution to be careful of anyone and everyone, and he would have full-on hyperventilating panic attacks by the time they got back in the van. Which led to more angst, as Sören thought that with the way he was freaking out like this he maybe wasn't the best choice to be the girls' guardian, but it was also too dangerous to him to try to have two probably-Force-sensitive children fostered out, and his conscience would nag him if he left them with others even more than if he tried to take care of them himself, even with his paranoia and panic. *Maybe there'll be a time when it'll feel safe again and I won't be reacting this way,* Sören told himself.

In the meantime, it was decided that eating inside restaurants wasn't happening, and they went to drive-thrus. Sören got sick of eating in the van, and eating out in general, missing a home-cooked meal.

He missed home, period. The moments of wonder and beauty in the presence of nature and the little quirky discoveries along the way - the giant sausage, Max the Moose - that had sustained them in the first few days of this voyage were no longer there as they ate at drive-thrus and slept in hotels. Sören was exhausted, shaken to the core. He just wanted to go home. Their journey still wouldn't be over yet once they got there - they would need baby furniture like a crib, they would need to think about the girls' future if Dag wasn't found for some time, as Sören feared - but at least they'd be someplace familiar, someplace warm...

It was on the last leg of the trip, on Friday December fourth, that Sören fell apart, missing Dag again, worrying that he'd fail Dag's daughters, feeling the most vulnerable that he'd ever felt in his entire life. Sören cried hard enough that Maglor had to pull over. Sören and Maglor got out of the van and Sören paced, nervous.

Sören finally addressed something that had been weighing on him. "It's easier for them to pick us off when we're scattered," Sören said, *them* being nebulous, their enemies known and unknown. "We should move to Reykjavik."

"I thought you didn't want to live in the city again," Maglor said.

"I don't, really. And I feel kind of like the girls would be missing out down there, Akureyri has, you know, more nature. But Margrét doesn't want to come back to Akureyri, and I don't know, I'd just feel safer if we were close to Margrét and Frankie and Flóki, like in the same city..."

Maglor sighed.

Sören narrowed his eyes. It was the wrong time for this. "Look. I know you don't like him, you still have a problem with him. But in case you haven't fucking noticed, my family is in shorter supply these days. So even if you don't like him, I need you to at least be willing to call a truce, for *my* sake, after what happened with Dag, and for the sake of these girls to not see their guardian such a damn wreck. A little less of a wreck, anyway."

Maglor gave him a hug and kissed Sören's forehead. "Moving to Reykjavik is kind of a big deal when we've already got a lot going on - like getting the girls settled in. Let's revisit this conversation when things have calmed down, but in the meantime I promised I wouldn't be shitty to Flóki and I will keep that promise to the best of my ability. I can't be warm to him right now, and *please* don't press me on that point - I can't just get over the fact that he helped kill my father. But I can manage to be civil."

When they got back in the van, the babies were crying again. They were a half-hour away from Fort Smith. "Shhhhh, we'll be home soon," Sören said, petting them. "We'll be home soon and things will be OK." He continued to pet them and make soothing noises, and the girls cried and cried.

They entered Fort Smith and Sören felt almost like throwing up with relief.

"I know we've been avoiding restaurants where we have to eat inside, but that KFC doesn't have a drive-thru and my stomach is growling," Maglor said.

"What about that cashier?" Dooku asked. "What if he recognizes us..."

"He'll recognize us, but it's more that Jim Hewitt guy I'd be worried about since he thought

we were going to Calgary. One of us can scout and see if he's in there... I might as well do it."

Sören wondered if Maglor was going to shoot him if Jim was in fact inside the KFC and recognized him. He hated that he even thought that. The babies cried louder, as if they were crying out *wanna go home*. Sören had a headache. Though he'd fed the babies in the van, it would be easier and less of a production inside the KFC where there were highchairs.

"Turn off the stereo for a few minutes," Sören said.

Then Sören began to sing, remembering his mother as he sang.

There's a lady who's sure
All that glitters is gold
And she's buying a stairway to heaven
When she gets there she knows
If the stores are all closed
With a word she can get what she came for
Oh oh oh oh and she's buying a stairway to heaven

The girls started to calm down a little.

There's a sign on the wall
But she wants to be sure
'Cause you know sometimes words have two meanings
In a tree by the brook
There's a songbird who sings
Sometimes all of our thoughts are misgiving

Ooh, it makes me wonder
Ooh, it makes me wonder

The girls quieted down, and Sören continued singing, even though his throat was dry and thinking of his mother hurt right about now. He sang all the way through to the end, and as the song ended they pulled into the KFC.

Maglor went in first to make sure Jim wasn't there, while Sören and Dooku sat in tense silence, both fearing the worst; Dooku reached for Sören's hand and squeezed. When Maglor came back and made the "go ahead" gesture, Sören once again felt that nauseating drop in adrenaline. It was almost over... they would eat, they would hike back to the rapids, they would disappear into the forest and re-appear at the Dimmuborgir, and then they would call Margrét and wait for her to fly up and drive them home. All of that still felt like too long. Sören was starting to cry again.

They got a bucket of chicken with mashed potatoes, gravy and biscuits, and sat down. Sören fed the girls before he started to eat himself, taking some enjoyment in doing the "airplane", the girls wrapping their tiny little hands around the spoon to help feed themselves, making a mess on their cute little faces. He could almost relax...

...The satellite phone went off.

Sören looked at Dooku and Maglor, and then Maglor said, "Here, I'll feed, you take the call," patting Sören on the shoulder.

"Hello?" Sören asked.

"Yes, hi, is this Sören?" came the Benedict Cumberbatch soundalike. "This is Anthony Hewlett-Johnson..."

Oh, shit. Sören cleared his throat. "Speaking. Hi, Anthony, what's going on?"

"First of all, where are you right now?"

"Fort Smith. We were just about to head back -"

"Fuck, I got you just at the right time." Anthony exhaled sharply. "Sören, you can't go back to Akureyri."

Sören blinked. His stomach froze; his heart sank.*No. No. No...* "What? I... I don't understand..."

"Sören. You. Cannot. Go. Back. To. Akureyri. Do you understand?"

"No, I don't. What's going on?"

"To make a long story short, it's too hot right now."

"Hot how?" Sören saw Maglor and Dooku snap to attention; Maglor's eyebrows shot up.

"So apparently, you going missing right after your brother's disappearance has... attracted the notice of the Canadian authorities, and Interpol. They went to Iceland."

"The..." Sören blinked again. "Do they know where my brother is?"

"No, as far as they claim. The problem is, now they're suspicious. As in, they've been interviewing your neighbors and people you know, and your next-door neighbors told them quite a story. There were some incidents earlier in November that... well... let's just say you haven't been very discrete about what you can do. It's why I'm calling you instead of Letitia, she's having to handle it."

"Oh, *Jesus.*"

"So I'm telling you now, Akureyri is a no-go."

"What are we supposed to do, then, if we can't -"

"Pick a place. Any place in the world, I will leave on a flight within the next two hours and get you set up. But I need to know *right now.*"

"Can I talk to my guys for a minute?"

"Yes, I'll hold. Make it fast."

Sören put the phone down. "We're fucked." He lowered his voice, even though it was just them in the restaurant and the cashier had gone back to the kitchen. "We can't go back to Akureyri. Feds are sniffing around..."

Maglor nodded. "I was afraid this would happen." He pinched the bridge of his nose. "Ask him if we need to portal."

Sören picked the phone back up. "Are you flying us, or are we taking the portal -"

Anthony laughed. "You still need to take the portal, and you still need to make it a remote, low-traffic location if possible. I'll arrange for a driver for you if it's a bit of a ways from

where you guys want to relocate but I mean it, I need to know now, so decide."

Sören put the phone back down. "We need to portal wherever we're going, but we'll get a driver if it's not, you know, the immediate location..."

Maglor rummaged in his knapsack and produced the map of the portal network. He spread it out on the table. They looked it over, and then Sören had a flash of memory, from the summer of 2019 when the triad was new and everything felt hopeful, before they took Ingwion's blood. It seemed naive in hindsight to feel that way...

Maglor was wearing a robe, and Sören sat up. After sitting together, petting, they resumed their stations, Maglor continuing to work on his song, and Sören his painting. Sören was still naked, and didn't care.

The thunder stopped and it was just rain, and finally, after seven AM, they decided to call it a night. Sören wasn't done yet, but he'd managed to get the three of them laying on a blanket in a garden, and just needed the rest of the background and the sky. Maglor surveyed the painting.

"That's gorgeous," he said.

Sören smiled. "I have no idea where that is," he said. "Just... you know, saw it, and painted it."

"Well..." Maglor pointed to a bird perching on a rock. "I recognize the bird. That's a kookaburra."

"Oh. That's, um, an Australian bird, right?"

Maglor nodded. "Those flowers right there, those are waratahs. Also Australian."

"You ever live in Australia?"

"No, but I've visited a few times. It was one of the places I wanted to take you, when we were together, before."

"That's amazing, cos I swear I've never seen this bird or these plants before." Sören chuckled. "Looks like we might go on holiday." Except the word he almost said, and just-in-time stopped himself from saying, wasn't holiday. It was honeymoon.

"Where do waratahs grow?" Sören asked Maglor.

"Southeast Australia. New South Wales, Victoria... Tasmania..."

Sören looked at the map. "Can we go to Sydney?"

Maglor looked at Dooku, and Dooku nodded. "It would probably be less of a culture shock for me, being British, than if we went somewhere else," Dooku said. "I know eventually we won't have that luxury but for the first move..."

Maglor had a pained look on his face and Sören could feel it - he knew that sooner or later they'd have to start moving around with him, but he was hoping they'd have at least another few years in Akureyri, and then when the news of Dag came...

*You knew we were going to have to leave,*Sören told him in the Force. *That's why you told us we needed summer clothes for the trip too.*

Maglor nodded. He closed his eyes and Sören saw tears slide down his cheeks.

The cashier came back out and Sören felt Dooku push with the Force. "You want to go back in the kitchen for the next fifteen minutes," Dooku commanded.

"I want to go back in the kitchen for the next fifteen minutes," the cashier repeated, and walked off.

"God, I hate doing that." Dooku cringed as he turned back to them.

Sören looked at the map again, not wanting to leave Anthony hanging. "The only portal in Australia where I can guarantee right now we probably won't have an issue is this," Maglor said, "which is Uluru." He pointed and Sören let out a low whistle.

"Jesus *fuck*, that's a long way from Sydney."

Sören picked the phone back up. "Anthony, we're going to Sydney, Australia."

"Brilliant," Anthony said. "Where are you coming in?"

"Uluru."

"*Fuck me.*"

"Maybe," Sören teased, desperately needing some levity in the situation.

"All right, Sören, there's one more thing."

Of course there is. "Oh god, what."

"You probably already figured this out when I said you can't go back to Akureyri... but the situation in Iceland is hot enough that we're going to need to make you disappear. In order to help you get set up, I need you to decide aliases and I'd prefer that you choose them yourselves so it's something you can commit to memory more easily."

That was a non-trivial decision. "Do we have time -"

"No, Sören, you really don't, I have a *lot* of documentation that I have to put together for the lot of you, including the girls, so the sooner I get on that the less of a pain in the arse this will be for everyone involved. You knew the day was coming when you would have to relocate, yes it's sooner than anticipated but you already should have been planning -"

"OK, I don't need a lecture right now if it's all the same to you, I'm stressed out as *fuck* -"

"I'm sure you are. *We all are.* I've been up for the last eighteen hours waiting on the final confirmation from Letitia that your situation was FUBAR before I called you with the news. But that's the nature of an emergency - you don't have the luxury of any more time to decide. I need you to come up with aliases for yourselves and the girls right now."

"Right now right now."

"When I say right now, I bloody well mean *right now.*"

"Couple minutes, please."

"I'll hold."

Sören put the phone down. "We have to come up with fake names too."

"Yeah, that goes without saying." Maglor made a face. "Well, I was using Mark Lowry as

recently as 2019 in Anchorage so I can't use that again. I'll trot out another alias I haven't used in awhile... Marcus Lauer." He looked at Dooku, then at Sören. "For the two of you, I would suggest something close enough to your names that you won't slip up and forget -"

"Yes. All right." Dooku frowned, concentrating, then he said, "I think I shall adopt a Belgian persona, since I speak enough Dutch and French to make it somewhat convincing. Nicolaas DeKok -"

Sören spat his orange soda, not able to help it. Even as stressed out as he was, his mind still went there. "DeKok."

"*DeKok*, yes. N-I-C-O-L-A-A-S, D-E-K-O-K..."

"DeKok," Sören snickered; Maglor was trying not to laugh himself.

Dooku glared. "Your turn..."

"I need another minute or two. What are we naming the girls?"

Maglor looked at Carrie with her black hair, Maedelle with her red hair. "Kate and Tori," he said. "After two of my favorite female artists, Kate Bush and Tori Amos."

Sören got back on the phone. "Mark will use Marcus Lauer. German. Nico will use Nicolaas DeKok -"

Anthony chuckled.

Sören tried not to laugh again, but Anthony laughing with him made him gigglesnort. "N-I-C-O-L-A-A-S, first name, D-E-K-O-K surname... He's Belgian now..."

"Got it."

"The dark-haired girl is Kate, the redhead is Tori... ah... Lauer..."

"Got it, and what about you?"

Sören rubbed his beard, his mind drawing a blank. "Ah..."

"Sören, we don't have time. Here, I can maybe help - you speak Danish as a third language, yes? Something Danish..."

"OK." He thought hard. "Ah... Stefan..."

"Good..."

"...Kierkegaard."

There was a long pause and then Anthony mumbled, "The most common form of despair is not being who you are."

Sören almost liked him already. "Jæja, so let's go with that. Stefan Kierkegaard."

"Will do. I will see you in Sydney, Mr. Kierkegaard -"

"Anthony, wait." Sören felt a surge of panic. "So... you... you're going to make us disappear."

"That's the plan, yes."

"I... my family. *My cats.* I can't lose them."

"We'll be in touch with your family to let them know the real truth of what's going on, so we can provide a safe way for you to make contact, and I'll make sure you get your cats. I'm a cat person too, I know how important that is."

"OK. And... well... we have a bunch of stuff at the house in Akureyri -"

"Sören, things can be replaced, I'll make sure you have everything you need in Sydney -"

"No, you don't get it, there are things that *can't* be replaced." Sören exhaled sharply.

"It's a bit risky to try to get someone into your house to get your things -"

"Please, *try.* I'm not asking for a lot, but there are some really important, irreplaceable things in there." Sören swallowed hard, tears burning his eyes. "My paintings. There are swords on a sword rack, one is a really old, family heirloom..."

"And my journals," Maglor said. "All my musical compositions are in there..."

"And Mark's diaries. The sword rack is in the living room, the paintings are in a closet in the bedroom we turned into a studio, and... Mark's journals are on a bookshelf in that room. There are other things that would be nice to have but not mandatory, like my plants..." *Oh god, my plants. They've been sitting there for almost two weeks...*Sören started to cry a little. "Please."

Anthony sighed. "OK. I'll see what we can do, but please understand the situation in Akureyri is *very* hot and we run the risk of blowing everything if we don't do this carefully -"

"I understand. Just, please. If you can."

"Is that all?"

"That's... that's all. Do you want me to call you when we arrive at Uluru?"

"Please do so as soon as possible when you arrive, and then I'm going to need you to stay put till I get a driver out to you. I'll go ahead and make reservations for you guys now at a nearby hotel while you wait for the driver to come out to take you to Sydney, I'll get a cab to pick you up and get you to the hotel once you've called me -"

"We have... too much stuff to fit into a cab, probably."

"Decide then what you're taking and what you're leaving behind, unless you want to stay at Uluru all day till I can arrange a driver with a bigger trunk space. Just so you know, it's summertime in Australia now, and it's going to be about 37 Celsius when you get there."

"*Jesus.*" Sören was already sort of regretting his decision to move to Australia.

"I'll see you in a few days, Mr. Kierkegaard. Have a safe journey."

Nothing is safe. Nothing will ever be safe again. Sören broke down crying, and the babies cried too.

_

Blackheath, London, England
10:12 PM local time

Anthony Hewlett-Johnson got up from his chair in the second-floor sitting room, down the hall from his boyhood bedroom - where he'd been living since October - and he stopped in the bedroom and grabbed the suitcase from the bed that he'd packed to go at a moment's notice. He quickly loped down the stairs, pausing a moment to look at himself in the mirror at the foyer. He'd at least got a shower in a few hours ago while he was waiting for the verdict from Letitia, but he still looked like he hadn't slept, tired circles under his eyes. He was dressed too informally for the office but with intent to be comfortable and inconspicuous for travel - a navy blue cashmere sweater and faded jeans with leather brogues that would service him well under his greatcoat for English winter, not so much when he got to Sydney. And he was going to need lighter clothes for summer, only having a couple "just in case" outfits appropriate for warmer weather in his suitcase, not knowing where the three men in Canada would choose to relocate to until several minutes ago.

The last ten days had been difficult; now the real work started. Anthony both thrived on the adrenaline and very much just wanted to fucking *sleep*.

First he had to say goodbye to his mum. He'd moved back home in October after he'd had a random panic attack at work that made him trip and fall down a flight of stairs, spraining his left ankle. It hadn't been the injury that had forced him out of his flat in central London but the nightmares, feeling himself die in a flash of white like a nuclear explosion... and the horrible, horrible depression. He was taking antidepressants for it now, at his mother's insistence - he had cashed in vacation time he hadn't taken back in October and promptly stayed in bed for most of the week, feeling like everything was hopeless bullshit, sick at all that was wrong with the world - climate change, senseless acts of violence, the resurgence of far-right politics and hateful rhetoric like the days before World War 2... feeling concerned at the responses of world leaders to increased reports of "psychics" which included the people his agency tried to protect...

...people like himself, and to a lesser degree, his mum. He feared it was only a matter of time before people like them were hunted - he feared it was what happened to the scientist who had gone missing. It was important to keep calm, to make decisions with a cool, rational head, but just the same, Anthony couldn't shake the feeling that his department at MI6 was going to have to work even harder in the not-too-distant future to keep their handful of "special cases" under the Queen's guard.

In the meantime... Anthony came into the greatroom where Elaine Hewlett-Johnson sat in a bathrobe and pajamas, her nose in a book, and her cat Craig - a Siamese she'd adopted from their late neighbor - on her lap. She looked up when she heard Anthony's brogues *thock* on the floor, and Anthony reached out with his hand and the book floated in the air over to him. "Jules Verne?" Anthony's lips quirked. "Wasn't he canceled?"

"Ha ha very funny Cornelius Anthony." Elaine made the "give it" gesture - her telekinetic abilities were not as strong as her son's, and tended to produce a headache if she used them, so it was something to reserve for emergencies.

Anthony let go and sent the book floating back over. "Fitting you're reading*Around the World in Eighty Days* - I myself am about to go on a*grand voyage.*" He reached for the

coatrack and his greatcoat floated over to him.

Elaine put the book down on the coffee table. "Where are you going, dear?"

His family had known when he was in Britain's Special Boat Service; he'd been recruited into the paranormal department of MI6, which technically didn't exist, after his use of telekinesis to save him and his team from a death trap aboard an Iranian tanker they'd been ordered to intercept had been captured on video. To most of the world he was an employee of Borovkov Enterprises, which his department did in fact contract for help in certain situations, such as relocations. But his mother knew the deeper truth - not that he'd be able to hide it from her anyway. And she knew that this was part and parcel of his line of work, there were times when he might have to drop everything and go halfway around the world on a moment's notice.

"Sydney," Anthony said, putting on his greatcoat, floating over the cashmere scarf.

"Well. That's... far."

"Yeah, it is." Anthony looked away, feeling a pang of guilt - moving back home in October had been good for his mother, not just necessary for him - and a pang of loneliness. He still wasn't completely OK after his mini-breakdown, not really; he'd returned to work, and the antidepressants had helped somewhat, but mostly he just felt like in forty years he had nothing to show for his life and it didn't even matter anyway because the world was fucked. And he hated that feeling, remembering the firebrand idealist he'd been in his younger years, even as recently as a few years ago, feeling like he was doing his part to save the world. Now...

"Maybe a change of scenery would be good for you, dear." Elaine nodded. "It's summer down there now, isn't it? That might help with seasonal depression..."

"They get winter there too, Mum. Just... you know. The opposite time of year." It felt like an idiotic thing to say.

"Will you be there for their winter?" Elaine looked towards the fireplace, her stocking and Anthony's hung on the mantle.

"I should only be gone a few weeks at most on this assignment," Anthony said. "I should be back before the holidays."

And yet, as soon as the words were out of his mouth, Anthony had the sinking feeling that there would be complications - things were already complicated, blowing up in Iceland like they were; he did not envy Letitia right now. And he could tell from the wistful look on his mum's face that she somehow knew it too.

"Well..." Elaine pursed her lips. "I'm still a bit worried about you..."

"I know. But I'm fine."

Their eyes met, her eyes green like his own, behind wire-rimmed glasses like the ones he wore when he didn't have his contacts in. *You're really not, Cornelius Anthony.* But she didn't argue with him past that point. "You shouldn't go alone." She got up, and for a minute Anthony was going to protest that she couldn't go to Sydney with him, but then he saw her use telekinesis - knowing she'd pay for it later with a headache - and he peeked and saw the hall closet door open, the cat carrier float out. She picked up Craig and brought him over to Anthony, who gave him skritches. "I know that being here with the cat has helped a lot. You need him more than I do."

With that, Elaine put Craig in the cat carrier - Craig meowed at being put in, and made a helpless whine once the door was shut. She handed the cat carrier to her son.

"I'll have to do some bureaucratic maneuvering, there's a ten-day quarantine usually and that's far too long for just a few weeks..." Even though, again, Anthony had that nagging suspicion he would be in Sydney for awhile.

"I won't tell," Elaine said.

"You're sure, Mum?" Anthony felt guilty, hearing the cat meow again. "You love him too..."

"I do. But I love *you*, and... you need it." Elaine nodded.

Anthony put the cat carrier on the floor for a moment and pulled his mother into a fierce, tight hug. *Don't you dare cry,* he told himself, but got choked up anyway.

Elaine let go first, squeezing his shoulders, and gave him a pat. "Enjoy Sydney," she said.

"I'm there for business, not pleasure, but I'll try."

"You can mix business with pleasure, you know."

Not in my line of work."I'll see you in a few weeks, Mum."

"Have a safe trip, Anthony."

Before he could get too far down the walkway, Elaine stood on the front step and called out, "I love you."

"I love you too." He couldn't look back, or he'd fall apart. He put Craig's carrier in the front passenger seat, his suitcase in the back, and then he got behind the wheel, taking a few deep breaths to pull himself together.

He drove into light snow, to coordinates where he'd board a private company jet - far less sophisticated than the movies made it look however, as he was going with a shipment of cargo to mask his entrance, look less conspicuous. He felt a strange sense of foreboding as he drove, and he chose one of Jamiroquai's slower songs from his playlist, reflecting his pensive mood.

He sees the stormy anger of the world
And wants no part of it at all
And as the weeping leaves of Autumn curl
He feels the savage winter call
See far below the dust of conflict settles on the hill
Where there was no escape before
And as he spreads his wings and soars up to another level
He brings the icy prophecies of war

Black crow, black crow, tell me where you really go
When you fly into the sunset, high in evening sky,
Black crow, black crow, tell me what you really know
Will we flourish in this hurricane, or will we fall and die?

Chapter 21

It was one thing to be told that it was Australian summer and hot, it was another thing entirely to come into it from the freezing cold of the Northwest Territories of Canada. It was like stepping into an oven. Sören almost faceplanted as he stepped out of the energy vortex just a few meters from the monolith of Uluru, the heat sucking him in, every step leaden.

The heavy winter gear he needed to wear in Canadian winter had to come off,*right now*. Right then and there Sören began to undress, as did Maglor and Dooku. This was not a sexy moment, however; all Sören could think of was the change of lighter clothing that he desperately rummaged for now.

Maglor had packed him two outfits. The black Joy Division shirt and faded jeans still seemed like too much clothing, but it would have to do. Once Sören had his T-shirt on, but before he could pull on his jeans, he went to the girls in their pram - they needed to be changed as well. In a panic, feeling like every second was of the essence to keep them from overheating, Sören put them in the little summer dresses that Maglor had packed for them. Kate was in a yellow dress with pink flowers, and Tori was in a pink dress with yellow flowers. The girls were fussing again. "I know," Sören said, tears coming to his eyes at their tears. "I know."

The sooner they could get out of the sun, the better. Still in his T-shirt and boxer briefs, Sören used the Force to pull over the satellite phone. He turned it on and the phone adjusted to show local time - Uluru was sixteen hours and thirty minutes ahead of where they'd just left in Canada and it was now a little after eight AM where they were - Saturday and not Friday anymore. *It's only eight in the morning and it's already this hot.*Sören was afraid to know what it would be like closer to noon.

After they got some meters away from the rock - it felt somehow disrespectful to use technology until they'd put a little distance between them - Sören speed dialed Anthony Hewlett-Johnson. "We're here," Sören said.

"OK. A cab is coming to take you to the hotel - you'll have to walk to the park entrance, GPS on your satellite phone will help you - and then you'll be waiting for our driver. It'll take her a couple days to reach you, since she's coming from far away herself -"

"You... you can't put her on a plane?"

"No, we can't risk it, she's having to drive to you, so you're going to have to sit tight for a couple days. I'm sorry about that. The hotel is nice, though, and all your expenses will be charged to me and my department. Tell the concierge your room is under the name Hewlett-Johnson."

"So..." Sören rubbed his beard. He was starting to sweat. "Stupid question, but is the cab a regular cab? How will the driver know it's us?"

"It's a regular cab service, yes, so the car should be clearly marked, and the driver has been given your description."

"All right. And... the driver who's picking us up at the hotel on, ah, Monday, I guess? It's a she?"

"It's a she. I'll call you when she's almost there, you'll need to go wait for her in the hotel lobby after my call. She'll ask you 'what is the ultimate answer to Life, the Universe, and Everything?' and your answer is..."

"Forty-two." Sören smiled a little.

"Very good. And this probably goes without saying, Sören, but I need you guys to stay put at the hotel once you're brought there, until your driver shows up. Even if you get bored, just..."

"Right now I'm *tired*," Sören said, hearing the weary edge in his voice, "and I want to fucking go home." The girls were still crying; Maglor was trying to get them to calm down.

"I understand. Well, the hotel should be very comfortable and hopefully will be a nice rest before you start on the next leg of your journey."

"How long is it from here to Sydney?"

"Close to thirty hours one-way."

"*Jesus.*"

"Your driver is a professional so she can make that in a little less than three days, driving eleven hours each day. You'll be home soon, Sören."

*This isn't home. Iceland is home, but I can't go back, can I.*Sören sighed and pinched the bridge of his nose.

"On that note I have to go, I pulled over to take this call and I have to get on a plane. Call me if your cab doesn't show in six hours -"

"Six hours. *What*."

"You're a long way out from anywhere else, that's the fastest cab that can be dispatched, it's coming from Alice Springs. And it's going to take you awhile *anyway* to walk from the rock to the park entrance, if I've done my maths correctly."

Fuck. Sören made noises.

"Now you see why I had the reaction I did when you said you were coming in via Uluru," Anthony went on.

"Jæja, you guys insisted that we use a low-traffic portal -"

"No shit, I know what I said," Anthony snapped. He sounded as cranky as Sören felt. "Anyway... as I was saying... call me if the cab isn't there in six hours, I have to catch my flight now, and either way call me when you get to the hotel, all right?"

"OK - wait - on a plane? You can't take calls in-flight, can you?"

"I'm on a satellite phone like you are."

Sören felt like an idiot for not realizing that. Then, in his fluster of self-consciousness, he found himself going there, his default coping mechanism of lame humor. "Hi On A Satellite Phone Like You Are -"

Anthony gave a tired chuckle. "Bye, Sören."

The call ended. Sören felt a brief pang of guilt for not at least saying "thank you" to Anthony - he knew Anthony was running himself ragged on his end too.

Sören put on his jeans. It was still too much clothing for this weather. Huan whined, and Sören realized the dog was thirsty. They were going to need to keep the girls hydrated too...

"We're going to wait for the cab at the park entrance," Sören said. He was already exhausted; he glanced ahead at the desert scrub, shimmering in the heat. "Fuck. This. Shit."

Huan whined again, and Maglor got the dog some water.

Dooku put an arm around Sören for just a minute - enough to be reassuring, but not wanting to overheat Sören further. "I must say," Dooku said, looking back some meters at the massive sandstone monolith, "that is even more gorgeous in person than it is in photos or on television."

Sören looked at it too. Dooku knew Sören well enough to try to keep his morale up by appealing to the artist in him, his eye for beauty. He tried to distract himself from the oppressive heat and worrying about the babies - worrying about everything - by focusing on the rock for a short while. He'd been here once before with Ingwion, very briefly, when Ingwion was showing him how the portal network worked; it had been Australian winter, and night, and they'd seen the aurora australis together. Here, under the blue sky, the monolith was no less impressive, and Sören could see why the indigenous Australians thought it to be sacred. There were plenty of people around the world who would give just about anything for a chance to see Uluru, and as horrific as this experience had largely been, he had a moment of gratitude... of wonder. He could feel the Living Force thrum in the land around them, the wild, primal energy of the rock and the trees at the base of the rock, the desert scrub surrounding it. He got a few pictures with his cell phone, before the sweat from even that small movement stung his eyes and he had to stop.

It was an eighteen kilometer walk from the rock to the park entrance, which took them approximately three hours at a moderate pace. Pulling their gear on the toboggans and walking with only the briefest of rest stops in the sun and high heat - even then, not restful as they worked to cool down the babies - was a test of Sören's strength and endurance. He questioned the sanity of hauling everything with them if they were going to have to leave some stuff in the cab but he knew leaving things behind at the rock itself would be disrespectful to an Aboriginal sacred site.

And even then, there was another moment of quiet awe, as they encountered a wallaby hopping in the brush. Sören squeaked. Huan behaved, and the wallaby stood still long enough for Sören to get a picture.

"It's so cute, I'm gonna die," Sören said.

Dooku chuckled and gave him a little kiss. "You're cute."

"You're cuter," Sören teased.

Dooku glared. "I am not cute -"

"Hi Not Cute -"

"We need to keep moving." Maglor smiled at them, but his eyes were tired.

Sören was never so glad in his life to be able to sit down, when they made it to the park entrance. But then the waiting for the next three hours, into the afternoon, was almost unbearable. The sun baked hotter. What was left of their water supply quickly vanished with giving water to Huan, giving water to the girls from a bottle, using some of the water to try to keep the babies cool and keep them from overheating - even having been chilled by spending time outside in the Canadian winter, their keg of water quickly heated under the relentless Australian sun, and Sören feared it wasn't enough to keep the babies from overheating. Sören, Maglor and Dooku also drank water, Sören cringing when the water was warm enough to have that unpleasant edge to it. Pouring sweat, exhausting their water supply, Sören stripped down to his boxer-briefs, no longer caring if he was indecent when the cab arrived.

They made shade for the girls' pram out of Maglor's winter coat used as a canopy and Huan lay under the pram for more shade. Maglor began going through their gear on the toboggans, since Sören had relayed the message they'd need to dump some of it to fit into the cab. Sören made sure to take the Silmarils and Huan's tiara and his cell phone out of his coat pocket - and Maglor made a "to keep" pile with the little bit of summer clothing, Sören's sketchbooks, the formula, baby food and dog food, the diapers, the car seats, what was left of the cash - now consolidated into one briefcase with the fake documentation that would soon be obsolete - and the pistols, satellite phone, the *palantir* Gandalf gave them, and Maglor's harp. Sören gave a sad look at the toboggans, their tent and sleeping bags, the flashlights, the winter clothing, that they were discarding. Sören felt guilty about leaving things behind, it felt like littering - at least it wasn't being left at the rock itself, but it was still pretty bad - and he hoped that someone would come by who might take whatever they left behind, finding use for it.

And as difficult as the trip had been, he also wished he had some sort of souvenir apart from the pictures he'd taken.

*Well, I learned how to change a diaper.*And the girls needed changing now.

The girls fussed some more and Sören, Maglor and Dooku tried to comfort them. Even in his underwear, Sören felt like he could die in this heat and it was getting hotter by the minute. He was terrified for the girls, trying to cool them with a wet washcloth. "Shhhh, it's OK. We'll get you safe soon..." But it felt like empty promises, like lies.

Sören started to cry again, even as he knew crying was spending water his body needed. He had never felt so completely vulnerable and helpless in his life - not even when he was at his worst times with Justin Roberts - here in the Australian outback in his underwear with the sun frying him, stranded and waiting for a stranger to get them, and then waiting some more for another stranger to take them into the complete unknown. He'd known back in 2019 when he took Ingwion's blood that the day would eventually come that he'd have to not simply follow Maglor around, but adopt Maglor's life for his own - moving from place to place, taking a new name, trying to find the balance in keeping a low profile in the age of Google and face recognition technology without going mad from isolation. He didn't know that it would come this soon, or that it would be the Force forcing his hand, after he'd learned from a young age to be so careful... that his own neighbors would sell him out to the Feds. Those fights in the backyard during the business with Flóki...

Sören frowned up at the sun. He leaned on Dooku and kept checking the time. At long last they saw a cab coming down the road. Maglor got up and when the cab came within

range, he ran to it - Sören was impressed he could run in this heat - and Sören watched through the daze he was in as Maglor talked to the driver. Then Maglor nodded and came back over to them.

Sören got dressed. Dooku and Maglor carried what they were taking from their belongings, and Huan trotted along with Maglor; Sören pushed the pram. He loaded the girls into their car seats. Maglor got in the passenger's seat and Dooku and Sören got in the back, with the girls in their car seats next to Sören. Huan had to ride in back, stretching out between Sören and Dooku. The cab was blissfully air-conditioned, and Sören started to cry again, this time from relief.

Their cab driver was middle-aged, weathered and scruffy-looking, wearing an AC/DC T-shirt and jean shorts. He had on a khaki boonie hat, so Sören couldn't tell if he had hair or not, or what color. "How ya doin'," he said.

"Hot," Sören said honestly. He had a headache now and he felt weak and shaky.

"I was told ya might need some fluids." He reached into his glove compartment - for a split second Sören panicked, not knowing what was in there - and he pulled out what looked like a cloth lunch bag. There was a freezer pack inside to keep the contents cool, and there were three bottles of Gatorade for the adults, a bottle of Pedialyte for the girls, and a bottle of unflavored Pedialyte "for your dog," the driver said.

Thank you, Anthony. Despite not knowing who he was apart from a very sexy voice, Sören could have kissed him for letting the driver know they would need hydration immediately.

Sören was dismayed to find out it was over five hours one way to Alice Springs, where their hotel room was waiting for them - Anthony had called it a "nearby hotel" several hours ago, but he supposed when you were that far in the middle of nowhere, "nearby" was relative.

They went through the Gatorade in no time, and Sören was still thirsty. He also felt nauseated, and then his leg started to cramp up. He hadn't had a leg cramp in what felt like ages - since before he'd become immortal - and it wasn't just painful but it was alarming. As much as Sören hated crying in front of strangers, the pain and his body's panic response to the pain made him start to cry. Dooku grabbed Sören's leg and propped it up as best as he could in the back seat of the cab, massaging - Sören felt the Force radiating in his hands. The energy in Dooku's hands made the muscle spasm stop, though there was a lingering achiness like Sören had pulled a muscle from how hard his leg wrenched. Dooku continued to rub.

"You have heat exhaustion," Dooku said matter-of-factly. "We're going to need to get more fluids in you as soon as possible."

Sören knew that if he was immortal and his body was responding like this, it would have been even worse if he wasn't immortal, he likely would have had flat-out heatstroke. That made him panic for the girls, who were flushed - sunburnt despite their best effort to shade them outside. He felt their skin and it was warm. Sören continued to administer Pedialyte with the bottle, chanting "*skít, skít, skít, skítur*" under his breath. *I'm an unfit parent, these poor babies...*

Sören took a few deep breaths. He had been to medical school, he had gotten as far as an internship at a hospital and he would have passed and become a full-fledged doctor if he hadn't had a nervous breakdown. He drew on his emergency training, trying to make

himself calm down for the sake of these girls, which was easier said than done. "Can I see your freezer pack?" Sören asked the driver. For once, Dooku didn't even mutter "may I", looking too exhausted himself.

Sören took the freezer pack, wrapped it in the washcloth he'd been using to try to cool down the babies, and each girl got a turn with the freezer pack held against their skin, back and forth. They felt less hot as time went on, which was a small relief; Sören was still concerned about the sunburn, and making sure they got enough fluid and electrolytes.

The drive to Alice Springs was long enough that with the time zone difference having come from Canada, and Sören's exhaustion from the long walk and the heat, Sören started falling asleep in the back seat. He kept waking himself up to check on the girls, panicking each time his body threw him awake. He had a better appreciation now for why Dag had sounded so tired the first few months after they were born - he hadn't even had these girls in his custody for a full week yet and already he was worn out, and he had Maglor and Dooku helping him.

At last they made it to the resort. Anthony had spared no expense with getting them in someplace classy, even as Sören felt like a pauper with not much other than the clothes on his back and no guarantee that he would get any of his belongings from home in Akureyri. At the front desk Maglor let the concierge know they had the suite under the name Hewlett-Johnson, and they were led out with no trouble, no fuss about the dog, not even a dirty look at being three men with two babies.

They passed by laundry facilities on the way to the suite, which gave Sören some relief since they had limited clothing with them. They had a suite done in tasteful neutral colors - a king-sized bed and a double crib, a living room with a comfy couch, ottomans, a coffee table and a huge flat-screen TV and a stereo, a kitchenette with a bar, and there was a black marble-finish jacuzzi in the bathroom, as well as a baby changing station. The suite had glass sliding doors in the living room area that led out to a deck which in turn led out to a pristine, inviting-looking inground Grecian-style swimming pool. "*Jesus*," Sören said, letting out a low whistle.

There was a restaurant at the resort, but the concierge also gave them menus for room service, seeming to know how exhausted they were. Sören's first action was to put the girls in their cribs, and then he flomped on the bed with a little scream. He knew the girls needed to be changed and fed, and he'd handle that after he'd stretched out for a bit. Now his other leg was cramping, and Sören felt like he was going to throw up.

After Dooku massaged the cramp out of Sören's leg, he went over to the kitchenette. The fridge in the kitchenette was loaded up with Gatorade and Pedialyte, again Anthony had seemed to know they were going to need it after six hours at Uluru, telling the concierge to stock their room. Dooku used the Force to thrust a bottle of Gatorade at Sören, and Sören chugged it. Dooku came back over to the bed to pet Sören, the Force still radiating in his hands, trying to soothe Sören.

"The girls..." Sören croaked out.

Maglor got out their baby food, and then as he picked up Kate he observed she needed to be changed, making a face. He went to the bathroom with the girls - Sören made a weak noise of protest, feeling like he was slacking off on his responsibilities, and Dooku held out his arm to keep Sören from getting up.

"We're all their fathers now," Dooku assured him. "You need to take care of yourself first."

"I'm sorry." Sören teared up again.

Dooku continued petting him, the energy flowing from his hands. "No need to be sorry."

Maglor came out with the girls a few minutes later; he'd found aloe vera in the bathroom to help with the sunburn. Sören insisted on at least doing that for them, even as awful as he felt that the babies had gotten sunburned in the first place. Sören knew he'd be as red as a lobster right now if the immortality hadn't changed his physiology to make him more resistant to injury, and even so, he still felt lingering sickness from having been out in the heat exerting himself. Sören pushed the Force into his touch, even though he knew that was additional exertion.

Kate and Tori were fed - watching the girls eat, and seeing that they had enough energy to perk up at the "airplane" and hold their spoons, made Sören smile weakly. Sören, Maglor and Dooku took turns holding the babies after they were fed, before putting them back in their cribs. Then Sören flomped back on the king-sized bed, wanting to sleep already.

"Ada, you need to eat something," Maglor said.

"Ugh." Sören had no appetite - a lingering symptom of the heat exhaustion. He rolled over and made a noise into the pillows.

"No, really, you need to eat something. Here, I'll call up room service -"

"Oh shit," Sören said, looking at the clock. "Was supposed to call Anthony when we got here..." He used the Force to grab the satellite phone and pull it over to the bed. Even that felt like too much now, something that normally was no effort for him at all. He hit the number on speed dial.

"We're at the hotel," Sören rasped.

"Good."

"Thank you for making sure we got hydrated."

"No need to thank me. I spent a lot of time in the Middle East, it's second nature to me now to make sure everyone has enough fluid."

Sören found that curious, but he knew pressing an intelligence operative about his time over there was probably a no-go. "OK. I'm dead on my feet so if there's anything else..."

"No, there's not. Well, there is one thing... If there are complications from the heat, if anyone needs medical treatment, let me know. We have a doctor who can get out to you."

Oh god, I don't need to fucking worry about that right now."OK."

"I'll see you in a few days."

"So you'll actually be meeting us?"

"Yes. In Sydney."

Sören felt like a dumbass again. He also felt a little pre-emptively shy, wondering what the

man with the sexy voice looked like. "Do I need to call you when our driver gets here Sunday, er, Monday -" There it was, the disorientation of having crossed the International Date Line.

"No, she'll be in touch with a mutual contact to relay details to me. Only call if there's an emergency, I'm going to be very busy getting everything set up here."

"OK." Now Sören said it. "Thank you, very much."

"You're welcome." A pause. "Rest well."

"You too, when you get there."

Sören put the satellite phone down and closed his eyes. He drifted off, and after some time Dooku stirred him awake. "Food's here," Dooku said.

"Not hungry," Sören mumbled; he still had no appetite. He wanted to sleep forever.

"*You will eat.*" Dooku nudged Sören with the Force and when Sören snapped awake, Dooku gave him a stern look.

One of them had called for grilled cheese, Sören's favorite - right down to it being Swiss on rye - in the hopes that it would tempt him to eat and get his strength back a little. There was a garden salad, and assorted finger foods like chicken salad wraps, even sushi. Sören managed to eat a bit of this and that and, after more Gatorade, he checked on the girls. They were going to need a bath. He brought them into the bathroom to wash them; Maglor helped. When they were clean and dry and in new diapers, Sören put them in their second change of summer dresses, and back in their cribs, taking a few moments to tiredly admire how sweet and precious they looked.

Then Sören got in the shower himself, and after a moment Dooku got in the shower with him. They hadn't had sex in a week, and they were both too worn out now to do anything but hold each other naked under the spray. Yet this too was intimacy, a much-needed moment of peace and comfort.

"Everything will be all right, darling." Dooku kissed Sören's forehead and rocked him.

Sören sobbed a little. "No it won't."

"Yes it will." Dooku cupped Sören's chin in his hand, stroking Sören's beard with his thumb, and looked into his eyes - firm yet tender all at once. "We have each other. After all that was done to us, after the way they tried to keep us apart..." Dooku pulled Sören close. "They couldn't. Our love was stronger than that. We will get through anything so long as we have each other. And I know you'll miss Iceland. But I am determined to work for the best life we can have in Sydney, while we're there."

It wasn't just Iceland that Sören missed. Dag was on his mind again as he crawled into bed, slipping between the cool, clean, high-thread-count silk sheets. And Finrod's father, Finarfin. He had Amrod and Amras again, but where was everyone else?

"Sleep, my love." Dooku gave Sören a little kiss, and Sören snuggled into his chest, nuzzling the chest hair.

At least there's Fingolfin. Sören would never take his love for granted, after everything.

_

Despite being checked into a five-star resort, Sören didn't really get to enjoy all of the luxury it had to offer. Rather than spending time in the jacuzzi or the pool on Sunday, Sören slept most of the day, jetlagged, sore, and completely and utterly bone-tired, soul-tired. He woke up only to take care of the girls and eat, and continue replenishing the fluids that he'd lost on Saturday.

At last in the late evening Maglor was doing laundry and Sören accompanied him, stretching his legs for a bit. After pacing around, Sören took a seat, and Maglor stood behind Sören and began to knead the tension out of his shoulders. Sören melted into his touch. "Mmmm, that's nice," Sören husked.

Back in the hotel suite, Maglor finished what he started, rubbing Sören's back. Sören's cock woke up, and when Sören rolled over he and Maglor kissed, and Sören moaned at the feel of Maglor's hard cock pressed against his. Even a week had been too long.

Sören paused the feverish kisses and caresses, stealing a nervous glance over at the cribs several feet away.

"They're all the way over there and they're sleeping," Maglor said. "If we keep it down and we pull up the sheet..."

Dooku joined in, taking turns kissing both of them, his hands sliding over Sören and Maglor as they explored him and each other. Sören still felt a little awkward about it, but not enough to refuse - he was too sexually frustrated, too horny, too needy for them, taking what comfort they could from each other in the chaos. But they were too tired still for anything strenuous, so with the sheet over them they got into a position to put their three cocks together and rubbed, stroking, continuing to take turns kissing, free hands roaming. As pent up as they were it took only a few minutes to climax, and the orgasm did Sören a world of good, smiling as the release throbbed through his body, taking him far away from his troubles, into light, into love.

Snuggling between the two of them, Sören whispered, "I love you."

"We love you too." Maglor kissed the tip of Sören's nose, then stole a sweet, lingering kiss.

Then Sören glanced at the sleeping babies again, and he realized he felt awkward for another reason. "So, uh, you guys." Sören pursed his lips. "I'm not ashamed of what we were, what we are to each other, but I think that it's probably a good idea to, ah, not mention the incest thing around the kids." Sören looked at Dooku and said, "Or to let them hear if I call you Daddy or Pabbi."

"Yes, as you know there is a difference between roleplay and real life," Dooku said, stroking Sören's cheek, "and quite a difference between Elves and humans. What was OK for us as Elves..."

"Exactly. I don't want to, you know. Fuck their heads up." Sören swallowed hard - he already felt like he was failing as a parent coming out the gate without that. "I mean... there's a non-zero chance they're going to find out who they were in a past life, like we did, and when they're old enough, then knowing that Ada and their uncle and one of their brothers had a special relationship, and this doesn't apply to them, is less of an issue.

Maybe. Hopefully. But while they're still kids, let's not discuss it around them..."

"That's understandable." Maglor patted Sören's shoulder. "And for what it's worth, I agree with that decision."

"So do I," Dooku said.

"I didn't think you wouldn't. I mean, it probably didn't even need to be said," Sören said. "But I still felt it was, ah, necessary." Sören ran a nervous hand through his curls and rubbed his beard. "We're already going to have a hard enough time with those kids, I think."

"Especially with them being Amrod and Amras." Maglor rolled his eyes. "Back then, I guess fate gave you the troll children last when you'd already had practice with Maedhros and Celegorm -"

"Like you weren't a handful yourself," Sören said, giving Maglor a pointed look.

Maglor batted his eyelashes and gave Sören an innocent face that wasn't innocent at all. "Me? A brat? Would I *ever.*"

"You're my kid," Sören said. "What do you think."

Dooku snorted. "At least mine were well-behaved..."

Now it was Maglor's turn to snort. "That's what they wanted you to think. Fingon was a little shit too, just saying."

"Everyone in this family is a shit," Sören said. "Period. End of story."

"I beg your pardon," Dooku said.

"Especially you, Ñolofinwë."

"I am not a shit."

Sören couldn't resist. "Right, my bad, you're a twat."

"As you know, Fëanáro, you're a dick -"

Maglor shook with silent laughter. "You worry about screwing up the kids or setting a bad example... and then you call each other those names."

"We're in Australia now, they're going to hear worse," Dooku said. "Frankie would feel right at home with the use of the c-word, from everything I hear about Australian culture."

Sören sighed, missing Frankie now too. He wondered if Margrét, Frankie and Flóki had dealt with the Feds in Reykjavik. He pushed that thought out of his head and looked back at the babies. "Well, Amrod and Amras got to go first this time, at least... of the ones I'm raising." As soon as those words came out of his mouth Sören found that curious, and probably the embarrassing product of an exhaustion-addled mind, as the phrasing implied there would be more children, and Sören thought there was no way he'd ever become a biological parent. "I dunno, do you think any of the others were already reborn?"

"It's more than likely," Maglor said, nodding. "And with any luck, we'll find them. But for

now, we've got the Ambarussa back, and... we've probably got our work cut out for us."

"Yeah. We've got our work cut out for us with... a lot." Sören made noises.

Maglor and Dooku patted him. "One step at a time," Maglor said. "Let's worry about getting to Sydney first... then everything else we'll take step by step."

"And right now, our next step should be sleep." Dooku pet Sören's curls.

–

They were woken up by the satellite phone the next morning. "Hello," Sören growled, irritated at being woken up.

"This is Anthony. Your driver will be there in an hour."

They got ready, with Sören still scowling at his reflection in the mirror as he brushed his teeth. In the lobby Sören paced - after getting much-needed rest yesterday now all his nervous energy came surging back.

Winter in the Northern Hemisphere was a popular time for Australian tourism and they weren't alone at the resort; Sören people-watched, feeling more and more nervous with each person checking out or in, wondering how far the news of Dag's disappearance had broken and if he would be recognized as the missing scientist's brother, or, worse, if they had somehow been tailed by anyone in another agency or any of the people who were responsible for his brother's disappearance. Sören hated feeling this paranoid, and wondered if there was ever going to be a time when he'd feel less paranoid and something approximating "normal". He worried that he'd screw the girls up if he was like this long term.

If Dag wasn't found soon, and he had them long term. Which with each passing day felt more and more the case.

It was great to have Amrod and Amras back, and Fingolfin and Maglor... and to know Findis and Lalwen were around... but everyone else felt so impossibly far. The family reunion felt more and more like a lost cause...

Most of the people who had been coming in and out of the hotel were white, like he was, but now there was a black woman coming in by herself. Sören tried not to stare, not wanting to be rude, but he was an artist and she was absolutely gorgeous. Sable brown skin, tall - she was as tall as Sören. She wore the same Doc Martens boots that both Sören and Maglor had on. She had shapely legs, in khaki cargo shorts, and her curves were nicely hugged by a light green camisole under an open white button-down short-sleeved shirt. Her arms had some definition that suggested she worked out or was otherwise very physically active. She had on aviator sunglasses, and wore her hair in long dreadlocks pulled in a high ponytail. She had thick eyebrows, high cheekbones and full lips, her facial expression defaulting to what looked like anger or annoyance, and a proud, regal walk to match - she commanded the lobby when she entered. Her head moved, suggesting she was glancing around the lobby before she walked up to the desk.

"I'll be with you in just a moment," the concierge said before ducking out.

The woman stood there for a few seconds, again glancing around the lobby, and then she

came over to them. She stooped to reach out to Huan. "G'day. Nice dog," she said, in a deep, smoky voice with an Australian accent. She let Huan sniff her. "Can I pet him?"

"Yeah, go ahead," Maglor said.

She pet the dog for a moment - Huan gave her a few affectionate licks - and then she lowered her voice and asked, "What is the ultimate answer to Life, the Universe, and Everything?"

"Forty-two," Sören said.

The woman pulled up her sunglasses. She had grey eyes. She was already gorgeous to Sören but her eyes were startlingly beautiful. They also suggested she was mixed-race, but Sören thought it was probably rude to be too curious.

He wanted to draw or paint her.

"Right," the woman said, looking at each of them as if to size them up. "Come along."

There was a shipping truck in the parking lot of the resort. Sören swallowed hard, remembering news reports of people being trafficked in vehicles just like this, people dying when being trafficked in vehicles like this. He knew that MI6 wasn't setting them up to be trafficked, and he didn't get any danger vibes from this woman, but it still unnerved him. And then he saw the logo on the other side of the truck, for Borovkov Enterprises. Sören restrained the urge to laugh out loud.

They weren't going into the back shipping compartment, but the cab, which was decked out like the inside of an RV with a seating area, a flat-screen TV, a little bookshelf with magazines and a few books, near a station with a mini-fridge and freezer and a microwave next to a small countertop, with a cupboard above the countertop, and farther back there were two bunk beds for four sleeping areas total, and a bathroom with not just a toilet but a shower and a baby-changing station.

Leave it to Ingwion to make sure his company's truck drivers travel in relative comfort, Sören thought to himself.

"Right, so." The woman folded her arms. "This is the deal. I will be driving all day today, tomorrow, and Wednesday... we will be in Sydney on Wednesday night. I am under strict protocol not to give you my real name, or to know your real names, for our mutual safety. I will be dropping you off at a safe house in Sydney where you'll be spending Wednesday overnight before another person takes you to wherever it is you're going on Thursday - again, for our mutual safety I don't need or want to know your business in Sydney. Nonetheless, we will have to do some communication back and forth, so let's start with what to call each other. You can call me Nina -"

"Not your real name," Sören said.

"No. And I'll call you..." She glanced at each of them. "Moe," she said to Dooku. "Larry," she said to Maglor. "And Curly," she said to Sören.

Dooku and Maglor both glared, while Sören tried not to laugh. His eyes met "Nina's" and she seemed just as amused as he was.

Nina went on. "We'll be sleeping in the cab, since this is a low-profile assignment." She gave them a wary look. "I'll be making rest stops every day so we can stretch our legs,

you can take the dog out to piss. And we'll be grabbing food now and again - nothing fancy, since we're on a timetable, I hope you can deal with the drive-thru of Maccas at least once or twice."

"Maccas?" Sören gave Maglor a pointed look, again trying not to laugh.*First Larry, now Maccas...* He had a feeling it wasn't intentional but it felt like Maglor was being trolled somehow just the same.

"McDonald's," Nina said without humor.

Sören could deal with that, albeit McDonald's hadn't existed in Iceland since the financial crisis years ago, but he could see Dooku and Maglor cringing.

"There's cold drinks and some snacks in the fridge and freezer, and snacks in the cupboard..." Nina looked around the cab, then at them. "If you have any questions, now's the time to ask."

"I think we're good," Maglor said, looking at Sören and Dooku, then back at Nina.

"OK then." Nina got in the driver's seat while Sören, Dooku and Maglor settled in the seating area of the cab, where they had the choice of watching something on the flat-screen TV or looking out the window, which would provide a nice view of where they were going. Nina looked over her shoulder then. "Oh, there is one more thing. I need music on when I drive. Don't bitch at me about my music."

With that, she put on the stereo and a few seconds later, "Sad But True" by Metallica started playing.

"I don't think you'll get any complaints from us," Dooku said, chuckling.

"Right on," Nina said and threw the horns; Dooku and Maglor threw them back.

Nina laughed - she flashed her first smile, beautiful, lighting up her entire face; Sören couldn't help smiling back. Then she put her sunglasses back over her eyes and started the ignition. "Let's rock."

Chapter 22

In contrast to the second round of their cross-country trek through Canada, the journey from Alice Springs to Sydney was far less fraught. Some of it was that Sören was too exhausted emotionally and physically to spin his gears the way he had coming from Thunder Bay to Fort Smith. He still had moments of worry and outright panic about his goddaughters, his missing brother, and whatever the future held in store for them; he still had moments of sorrow, aching for his brother, all the regrets and what-could-have-beens about keeping in better touch, seeing him more often. But he was forcing himself to try to "tune out" now, because he knew he did no one any favors when he was constantly upset, especially not the girls, who were fussy enough without empathically reacting to his mood.

Strangely enough, Nina's presence seemed to help, even though she was on protocol to not speak with her passengers unless it was absolutely necessary - not simply so she could focus on driving across Australia, but also because whoever instated the protcol seemed to think the less they knew about each other, the safer they'd all be. But she was pleasant enough, if a bit terse, when she did have to interact with them. And knowing that she was a relatively safe outsider - not what Sören had started to think of as Schrodinger's Norse God or Schrodinger's Government Agent - helped as well. And even though she didn't speak much, there was nonetheless something strong and comforting about her energy.

Dooku and Maglor read, or watched movies on the flat-screen TV. Sören looked out the window at the gorgeous view of the Australian outback rolling by - though he also quipped, "I feel like my life has turned into *Mad Max*." He was grateful for the rest stops not just to stretch his legs, but to be able to look around - even in pockets of civilization, there was still wildness all around them; it was like nothing Sören had ever seen before, and it captivated him.

He had a moment of wonder on Tuesday afternoon when Nina stopped to get petrol and they got out of the truck, and Sören saw a mob of kangaroos hopping several meters away, across the road. Sören squeaked, and then he tried to not make a scene, not wanting to scare them off. Nina watched him watching the kangaroos and she couldn't help but laugh, her eyes crinkling at the corners as her smile lit up her face again. She was amused enough to finally break protocol to a point and interact.

"That your first kanga sighting, mate?" Nina asked.

Sören nodded. "I've never been to Australia before." His eyes widened. "You've seen them, I take it?"

"*God.*" Nina chuckled. "They're all over the place. I used to give outback tours, years ago, people would lose their shit over seeing kangas like it was the most rare thing in the world and not realize they visit my backyard, they're kind of a pest actually."

"Awwwww? But they're so cute."

"They are cute. Cute arseholes."

Sören couldn't help laughing at that. Nina laughed too.

"Do you live in the outback? Er, sorry, I shouldn't be asking that, with the rules," Sören said, feeling sheepish.

"You shouldn't, but, I suppose it can't hurt much - I don't live in the outback... now. I grew up on a sheep farm, though, in the outback, so I have some familiarity. But kangas are all over Australia, not just the outback." Nina watched the kangaroos continue to hop along. "You'll see enough of them in Sydney, prolly. Might even get sick of them."

"I can't imagine ever getting sick of them," Sören said, continuing to stare after the kangaroos with awe.

Growing up on a sheep farm explained why Nina had the kind of body that suggested she was active. Sören was very curious about her, but when they got back in the truck he decided not to pry, staying on the right side of the protocol.

But he ended up drawing the kangaroos... and her. He found himself drawing Nina riding a kangaroo like she was going off to war, both she and the kangaroo clad in armor. It was a cute, fun little doodle, something that made Sören smile as he sketched. He thought about giving it to her to say "thank you" for driving them, even though he knew this was a job she was hired to do and getting paid for, he still felt grateful to her.

Yet, he also felt self-conscious, since she'd said the kangaroos were pests, and Sören didn't know if she'd think it was creepy that he drew her - let alone that he wanted to do more serious drawing of her, even paint her - or if she'd even like the drawing, if she'd find it lame. Maglor smiled when he looked across at the sketchbook, and Sören's face burned. He quickly flipped his sketchbook to a fresh sheet to work on something else.

He had brought his old sketchbooks with him on the trip, and even though he had a sketchbook that was relatively new, bought months ago, before the Dagorath, that had more room, clean papers for drawing, he was using the last few sheets of one of his oldest sketchbooks - drawings dating all the way back to 2007, 2008... as well as some from 2009, when he and Maglor had first met and fallen in love. Having attracted Maglor's notice now, he flipped to some of those older pictures, like a sketch of Maglor sleeping, a sketch of Maglor playing guitar, a decidedly not-safe-for-work sketch of Sören and Maglor making love. Maglor took Sören's hand and stroked it, and leaned over to give him a sweet, lingering kiss. They couldn't have sex in the truck, so they had to keep it somewhat chaste to avoid getting too frustrated, nonetheless it was a tender moment that made Sören melt, and he put aside his sketchbook for awhile and snuggled with Maglor.

Later, Sören sketched that moment, the two of them curled up together, a much-needed moment of peace. It started as a regular black-and-white sketch - he'd color it in maybe another time - but there was a lot of detail, as his work tended to have, wanting to make it look realistic. Just as he was adding the finishing touches, Kate began squalling, and a minute later Tori did too.

Kate needed changing, and then after he changed Kate, Tori peed and needed changing as well. After changing them they continued to fuss, which wasn't entirely unusual, but they were fussing for longer than usual, and Sören got the distinct sense that they somehow knew they weren't home yet and they really, *really* wanted to go home. Sören tried to calm them down but it wasn't working.

Maglor tended to calm them down when Sören couldn't. As he and Sören rocked the girls, Maglor asked Nina, "Can you turn off the music for a few minutes? I need to sing to these kids."

Nina nodded - she knew Maglor wasn't complaining about her music, just needed it off briefly.

Lullaby and goodnight, with roses bedight
With lilies o'er spread is baby's wee bed
Lay thee down now and rest, may thy slumber be blessed
Lay thee down now and rest, may thy slumber be blessed

They continued to cry, when normally that song would do the trick. Maglor frowned and then after a minute he tried something else.

Twinkle, twinkle, little star
How I wonder what you are
Up above the world so high
Like a diamond in the sky
Twinkle, twinkle little star
How I wonder what you are

When the blazing sun is gone
When he nothing shines upon
Then you show your little light
Twinkle, twinkle, all the night
Twinkle, twinkle, little star
How I wonder what you are

The girls were still making a racket. "Shit," Sören said, feeling panic, hoping nothing was seriously wrong to make them cry like this.

Nina pulled over. She was scowling now, and Sören worried that she was angry with them - for the briefest instant Sören feared she was going to kick them out for being annoying and leave them stranded. But the scowl turned out to be one of concern because then Nina said, "Here, let me try." She made the "give it" gesture and Sören passed over Kate, and then Nina gestured again.

"Both of them," she said.

Sören was impressed she could hold both of them at the same time, since although they weren't quite toddlers they weren't newborns anymore, they were big, unwieldy babies. He handed over Tori.

Nina put Tori down on the passenger's seat for a moment, turned the stereo back on, pressed a few buttons, and then "Nothing Else Matters" by Metallica came on. Nina picked Tori back up and rocked the twins together, singing in a husky, bluesy contralto.

So close no matter how far
Couldn't be much more from the heart
Forever trusting who we are
And nothing else matters

Never opened myself this way
Life is ours, we live it our way
All these words I don't just say
And nothing else matters

Trust I seek and I find in you
Every day for us something new
Open mind for a different view

And nothing else matters

The girls started to calm down. Maglor smiled and his tenor joined her on the chorus, singing harmony:

Never cared for what they do
Never cared for what they know
But I know

They sang together through the end, and the babies were calm. For good measure, Nina put on another song to sing to them, this one by Skid Row:

Woke up to the sound of pouring rain
The wind would whisper and I'd think of you
And all the tears you cried – they called my name
And when you needed me I came through

Paint a picture of the days gone by
When love went blind and you would make me see
I'd stare a lifetime into your eyes
So that I knew that you were there for me
Time after time you were there for me

Maglor once again sang with Nina on the chorus:

Remember yesterday - walking hand in hand
Love letters in the sands - I remember you
And through the sleepless nights, through every endless day
I wanna hear you say, "I remember you."

When the song was over, Nina put them back in their pram and Sören and Maglor tucked them back in, taking a moment to admire the precious sweetness of the babies. *Our kids,* Sören thought to himself, taking Maglor's hand.

They sat back down. "That was quite a performance," Dooku said.

Nina took a little bow.

"Yeah, how the hell did you get them to calm down with that?" Sören asked. "And hold both of them."

"I have twins," Nina said. "I used to sing them all kinds of metal to get them to sleep. Including 'Enter Sandman', which probably is kind of creepy for a lullaby, but it worked."

Sören tried not to laugh too hard, not wanting to wake the girls up. Maglor grinned. "Aren't you a bit young to know so much about hair metal?" Maglor asked.

"I'm twenty-seven," Nina said. "So yeh, it was a bit past my time - that's my da's music, he raised me on that."

"Thanks," Maglor muttered under his breath. "I don't feel like an old geezer or anything..."

Newsflash: you are an old geezer, Sören spoke into his mind.

"Hair metal," Nina went on, "and Viking metal." She laughed as she pulled back on the road.

Nina got more interesting all the time. "So twins, huh?" Sören asked.

Nina nodded solemnly. "They're back at home with their dad. They know Mummy has to go away every once in awhile, this is my job." She glanced over at Sören, then back at the road. "Right then, let's be on our way."

"Uh... thank you." Sören couldn't believe the girls had quieted down from that.

"Yes, thank you very much," Maglor said, and then he added, "You've got a great voice," sincerely.

Nina smiled over her shoulder. "Thanks, so do you. My god, you could be on one of those idol shows."

Maglor laughed. "Not likely."

_

On Wednesday, Sören felt restless, knowing they'd be in Sydney by evening, and then the following evening they'd be in their new house. He watched the Australian landscape out the window again, continuing to be mesmerized by its wild beauty. He once again felt inspired to sketch, this time sketching the outback, and he found himself sketching Nina again, a more serious sketch than before. He remembered her mentioning that she used to give outback tours - he wondered why that was "used to", in the past tense - and it seemed that in the sketch she was searching for something, looking out into the distance.

Their afternoon rest stop was in another scenic area. "Almost there," Nina said as they got out of the truck - everything was more green here than it had been in the outback. Sören was practicing trying to hold the girls at the same time, and walk around with them. "Ma-ma," Kate babbled, poking Sören. "Ma-ma. Ma-ma."

Sören laughed and kissed Kate's cheek. "Oh god."

There were more kangaroos. Sören gasped and Kate and Tori's little faces lit up. The girls began to wriggle and bounce in his arms, making nonsense sounds, smiling at the kangaroo family hopping meters away. "Yes, those are kangaroos," Sören said, and made a mental note to get them a stuffed kangaroo as soon as possible. "You like kangas?"

"Ka-ka," Tori said.

Nina snorted, and came over to tousle Tori's hair. "Yes, they make lots of ca-ca," Nina said, and now Sören snorted too.

"Do they really?"

"Yeh, I told you they were pests. Cleaning kangaroo shit out of my yard is an experience." Nina made a face.

Sören's laughter rang out - he couldn't help it - but Nina laughed too and patted his shoulder. Sören really wished they could be friends, Nina seemed like the kind of person

he'd love to go have a beer with.

"Roo," Tori said, but she was looking at Nina as she said it. "Roo! Roo!"

"Ma-ma," Kate said, poking Sören again. Then she grabbed onto one of Nina's dreadlocks and said, "May. May may may."

"Oh shit, I'm sorry," Sören said, gently prying Nina's lock from Kate's hand.

"No, yer good, mate," Nina said. "My babies used to grab my hair a lot when they were that age. They'd eat it, too." She rolled her eyes and chuckled.

Kate grabbed a lock again and then Tori did too, and Nina just let them, smiling fondly. "May may may," Kate cooed, tugging on the lock, working it up and down. "May may may may may."

"Ya ya ya," Tori said, also tugging on Nina's lock. "Ya ya ya."

"O-ookay." Sören knew Nina had said it was fine, but he didn't want to overstep bounds. He once again gently removed the girls' hands from Nina's hair.

Back in the truck Nina put on 80s music, as a change from the metal of the last few days. "My da listened to that too," she said, "though he'd ground me for life if I went around telling people he secretly likes Duran Duran." She sang along:

Dark in the city, night is a wire
Steam in the subway, earth is afire
Do do do do do do dodo dododo dodo

Woman, you want me, give me a sign
And catch my breathing even closer behind
Do do do do do do dodo dododo dodo

In touch with the ground
I'm on the hunt down, I'm after you
Smell like I sound, I'm lost in a crowd
And I'm hungry like the wolf

Sören fed the girls, and then rocked them for a bit to help them digest. When they were back in their pram, Maglor and Dooku entertained them - they had made puppets out of socks for lack of things to do on the trip. Sören watched, laughing, as he had his sketchbook out again, sketching the scene playing out before him, wanting to preserve the adorable memory.

Then he snapped to attention when he saw the sign for the city limits of Sydney. He put his sketchbook off to the side, completely focused on drinking in every sight of the magnificent sunset over the hills and valley, as if the land were welcoming them home. And the perfect song came on the stereo:

I've never seen you look like this without a reason
Another promise fallen through, another season passes by you

I never took the smile away from anybody's face
And that's a desperate way to look for someone who is still a child

In a big country, dreams stay with you
Like a lover's voice fires the mountainside
Stay alive

I thought that pain and truth were things that really mattered
But you can't stay here with every single hope you had shattered

Sören teared up, chills raising gooseflesh on his arms. He'd felt so hopeless - indeed, like every single hope of his was shattered in a matter of weeks. Maybe Australia was a fresh start they needed.

I'm not expecting to grow flowers in a desert
But I can live and breathe and see the sun in wintertime

In a big country, dreams stay with you
Like a lover's voice fires the mountainside
Stay alive

In a big country, dreams stay with you
Like a lover's voice fires the mountainside
Stay alive

So take that look out of here, it doesn't fit you
Because it's happened doesn't mean you've been discarded
Pull up your head off the floor, come up screaming
Cry out for everything you ever might have wanted
I thought that pain and truth were things that really mattered
But you can't stay here with every single hope you had shattered

Sören swallowed hard. His eyes met Maglor's.

I'm not expecting to grow flowers in a desert
But I can live and breathe and see the sun in wintertime

In a big country, dreams stay with you
Like a lover's voice fires the mountainside
Stay alive

The safe house where they would be spending the night turned out to be a warehouse for Borovkov Enterprises. Sören wondered if Ingwion knew they were in Sydney, or if Ingwion was even in this world at all, if he hadn't fucked off somewhere else. As the rest of his hopes had been shattered over the last two months, Sören didn't think he'd ever see Ingwion again. He sighed as he got out of the truck.

Nina helped them unload their things, and at last Sören, Maglor, Dooku, Huan and the girls were outside the warehouse with their belongings. Nina lingered for a moment.

"Well, it's been a pleasure." Dooku was ever the gentleman.

Nina shook his hand, and Dooku kissed it old-world style, making her laugh. Then Maglor also shook her hand, and Sören. Sören fought the urge to hug her, not knowing if that would be unwelcome, not wanting her to feel unsafe. He knew it had probably been tense enough for her to transport three men, even if they had babies and a dog.

"Thank you so much for driving us," Sören said. "I hope we weren't too much trouble."

"Nah, you guys were fine." Nina waved to Kate and Tori in their pram. "You be good for your dads..." She snickered at Sören. "And your mama, OK?"

"Have a safe journey back to wherever it is you're going," Sören said.

Nina nodded. "You guys be safe too. I hope that Sydney treats you well while you're here."

With that, she was gone - Sören watched as she got in her truck, and watched as she began to pull out, then Maglor and Dooku nudged him, as there was a uniform-wearing employee gesturing for them to come inside.

As it happened the warehouse had a suite not dissimilar to a hotel room with a couch, a bed, a TV, a kitchen area, and a bathroom. There was also a washer-dryer unit, which Sören was relieved to see because they didn't have many changes of summer clothing. After rummaging around for something to eat, Sören and Maglor bathed the girls, then the adults took turns showering, and they started a load of laundry, half-watching Australian television. When their laundry was done, Sören, Maglor and Dooku settled down for the night, Sören laying between them in the bed, and though anticipation of starting their new life in Sydney tomorrow would have kept him awake any other time, the last few nights of sleeping in a cramped bunk caught up with him and he fell asleep quickly.

Which was just as well, because a buzzer woke them up at eight AM on the morning of Thursday the tenth. A female voice with an Australian accent announced over an intercom, "Please report to room 2B at nine AM."

The girls were changed and fed, they got dressed, and made their way down to room 2B, which was on the other end of the building and felt like an endless walk past different storage rooms and offices. Sören's heart raced, feeling slightly apprehensive about whatever it was that was going to happen.

Room 2B was like a typical office, with chairs along the walls, and a desk. The man waiting for them in the room was sitting behind and slightly away from the desk in a leather swivel chair. On the desk there was coffee, fruit and pastries, which was good because Sören needed more caffeine and he was a bit hungry.

The man in the room looked to be mid-to-late thirties, possibly a bit older. He had short, neatly combed and gelled black hair that was showing the first threads of grey. Long-lashed, wide-set green eyes - *pretty eyes,* Sören thought to himself. The man was a bit too pale for the Australian summer. Handsome - very handsome in a classic "leading man" sort of way, chiseled features, generous mouth, clean-shaven. He had a trim build, and was dressed in a black tie, white shirt rolled up at the sleeves in the summer heat, black vest, black trousers. Professional-looking without being *too* formal. The sort of man that Sören would cast in a James Bond movie as Bond if he were the one doing the casting.

The man just stared at them for a moment, and Sören felt a touch of annoyance - not just being kept waiting, as the sooner whatever this was got done and over with the sooner they could *go home*, but annoyance as much at himself for staring right back at the eye candy, feeling kind of like he was being a pervert for ogling a random stranger but he couldn't help it. *Oh shit, he's hot,* Sören thought to himself, heat flooding through him. Then Sören smacked himself mentally. *Get a damn hold of yourself.*

"Jæja?"

"Ah. Yes." The man rose to meet them and Sören saw he was slightly taller - six-two if Sören had to guess. He walked over, and put out his hand. "Sören Sigurðsson... welcome to Australia."

That was the Benedict Cumberbatch soundalike. He didn't look a thing like Cumberbatch. Sören's heart skipped a beat. "Oh, you're..."

"Anthony Hewlett-Johnson." He shook Maglor's and Dooku's hands as well. Huan barked in greeting.

Anthony leaned back, sitting on the edge of the desk instead of back at his chair. "I know you've had a terribly long journey, and you just want to get to your new home. But before I bring you there, I need to touch base with you about a few things first."

You can touch my base all you want. Sören would have kicked himself if he could, feeling embarrassed. Sören, Maglor and Dooku took seats.

Before Anthony could go on, Sören blurted out the other thing that was on his mind. "Have you guys found my brother?"

"Not yet," Anthony said with an apologetic look.

"Or found out who took him?"

"We don't know that either." Anthony sighed. "The Canadians are claiming they don't know anything - in fact, they're looking for him too. And the Americans, of course, are claiming that they don't have him. Which doesn't mean they don't... but doesn't mean they do, either. We're doing what we can to find him and as soon as we find out something... you will be notified."

Sören nodded, but he felt like crying now. It seemed like the longer this went on, the more slim the chances that Dag would be found - whoever took him could clean up the trail.

"In the meantime," Anthony said, "as of now, Sören Sigurðsson, Alejandro Magalhães, and Nicolae Dooku, you no longer exist. However, you are not stateless persons." He got up, went around to his desk, and opened a drawer. He produced three large manila envelopes, one for each of them, and there was a smaller envelope that Sören opened and saw fake documentation for Kate and Tori Lauer - listing Stefan Kierkegaard as the father on the birth certificate. Sören's mouth went dry. He opened his envelope and found a marriage certificate between Stefan Kierkegaard and Marcus Lauer. Sören and Maglor looked at each other, then back at Anthony, who came back round to sit on the desk.

"I have you listed as the girls' father in the event there is ever any medical procedures that require something from a blood relative - for example, bone marrow." At Sören's look of alarm Anthony put up a hand. "I hope, as well as you do, that it's never necessary. But it's better to be prepared than not. And as far as the marriage certificate, please pardon me for being presumptuous, as I understand you and Nicolae were the ones who were married -" Anthony looked at Dooku, then back at Sören. "But in your new life here, we are endeavoring to keep you looking as 'normal' as possible without forcing you back into the closet. It raises less eyebrows with the public for two people who look near a similar age to be married, than with an age gap..." Anthony's voice trailed off at the stern look Dooku gave him and Anthony gave another apologetic look. "I'm sorry. It's not a personal judgment on my part. Again, this is to err on the side of caution."

"I understand," Sören said. He never had a problem with Dooku being old enough to be his father, but they'd gotten some comments about it over the years.

"Which leads me to the next point of business: I am of the understanding none of the three of you age anymore, in addition to having special abilities. We know that Alejandro Magalhães aka Mark Lowry has done a fair amount of moving around because of this. I would like to suggest that you spend a bit longer than your usual shelf life of seven to ten years here in Australia - long enough to ensure your daughters get an education here that is uninterrupted. Small vacations are fine, if you let us know where you're going - a few days, few weeks, even a month or two on holiday - but until the girls are grown, we'd like to strongly encourage you to make Australia your home."

"You're suggesting we stay here close to twenty years, then," Maglor said.

Anthony nodded. "It honestly isn't so out of the ordinary now for someone who looks to be in their thirties to actually be closer to fifty, and with Nicolae - Nicolaas, now - you look good for your age, and your new documentation has you as a bit younger than you actually are."

Dooku blushed. Sören felt a touch of amusement at Anthony saying Dooku looked good for his age, and Anthony's cheeks were also slightly pink. Dooku looked a bit flustered now, intensifying Sören's amusement, and then Sören's eyes met Anthony's and Sören felt that stupid fluttery, horny feeling again that he wished would go away.

"And if you're worried about the potential for suspicion," Anthony went on, "I will remind you that you're under our watch and we can help you if you're in a tight spot. It's also easier for us to help you here than it would be if you went off to parts unknown, since Australia is a Commonwealth country... you're still under the Queen's protection."

"And that worked so well for my brother in Canada," Sören said bitterly, before he could stop himself.

Anthony tried to keep his expression neutral, but Sören watched his brow furrow slightly. "Yes, well... as we told you, he exposed his abilities in public. And a big part of why we had to make you disappear was for similar reasons - Letitia only just now is getting back from the situation that blew up in Iceland. And that leads me to the final, and perhaps most important part of our conversation. You know you are going to have to keep a low profile. You *cannot* risk exposing yourself again. And I'll be blunt with you, Letitia is... not amused. She warned you back in September that if there was another incident with exposure, she was going to assign you a babysitter. She really did mean that, and we are currently in talks about it, but one of us is going to end up assigned to you."

"When you say babysitter, do you mean, like... living with us?" Sören cringed.

"Not necessarily - though that's on the table if it happens again. But certainly, someone to monitor everything more carefully and do regular check-ins. Letitia and I and the team are still discussing it. It may be Letitia herself, it may be somebody else..."

"OH god." The thought of having Letitia up their ass... Sören cringed again.

"But for now... in addition to identification documents and cards, enclosed you will find bank cards, credit cards, and information about your accounts, as well as paper trails that will help with schooling and employment should you pursue it. I would recommend being self-employed if at all possible, but I leave that up to your judgment. The only thing I can

ask of you is that you don't do anything with yourselves that would cause a lot of attention. So, Mark... Marcus... if you wanted to play music, for example, you could do that at local clubs - going on television or pursuing a major record deal is a no-go."

"Obviously," Maglor said, an edge to his voice.

"Sören. Stefan." Anthony's eyes met his again.

"Please, call me Sören if we're in private," Sören said. "I need to preserve some of who I am."

"I understand." Anthony gave him a brief sympathetic look. "Sören... the good news is that we have safely retrieved your art from the house in Akureyri, as well as the other objects you asked us to get you. I have it, here in this warehouse, it'll be coming home with you today."

"Oh thank fuck," Sören said, relief flooding him - at least there was that.

"The bad news is that you have a very distinctive style of painting. Your art is marvelous. I might commission you at some point, if you were OK with that."

Sören was touched - he didn't sense any guile or false flattery; Anthony broadcasted seeing some of Sören's paintings and looking with awe, breath caught... The mental image quickly faded.

"But it is *too* good, is what I'm telling you. If you showcase your work anywhere public, such as a gallery, even using an assumed name, there is a risk of exposure, lines connected between Sören Sigurðsson and Stefan Kierkegaard, and that's a problem."

"I'm not anyone famous," Sören said, feeling a bit on edge.

"No, but you're not an unknown, either. You ran a studio in Akureyri. You've done exhibits in Reykjavik and London. Even with being on the other side of the world, there's a chance that you will run into someone from those art circles, or someone who knows someone. Regardless, it's not safe for you to show your work with your current style, and won't be for some time. By all means, keep producing art, just know that your current style must be limited in its exposure and anything meant for public consumption either needs to be in a different style or a different medium altogether."

Sören felt like crying. He didn't want to cry in front of Anthony, even if Anthony was giving him a compassionate look and he could *feel* it, seeming to know how much this was crushing him. Of all of the things Sören had lost - his family in another universe, his ability to drive, Ingwion, Dag, his home in Iceland, his studio - this was the final hope shattered, the last straw of last straws. If it wasn't for the girls and needing to be here to take care of them, he promised his brother... *Don't think like that. Don't you dare.*

"Fuck," Sören said.

"You said you had our things," Dooku said. "What about our cats..."

"They will be delivered to you tonight, they're at a different location. I had to pull a bit of strings to get past the mandatory quarantine." Anthony frowned.

"What about my family? If I no longer exist, on record..." Sören folded his arms.

Anthony took a deep breath. “This is the worst part, the hardest part of all of this. We are relocating your sister and her partners. But as far as your cousin Ari goes, and your aunts...” Anthony shook his head. “It's too much of a risk for you to be in contact with them right now. Or for awhile. Quite possibly ever.”

Sören's heart sank into his feet. A sob choked out of him, and then he tried to pull himself together, but it was harder to do. The last straw of last straws had been surpassed by the very last of straws.

“I'm sorry,” Anthony said, his eyes sympathetic even as he tried to keep his expression neutral, be the necessary fortress of calm in the storm. “If this changes... you'll be the first to know. I will say, however, that your sister and her partners should be in touch in the not too distant future, so at least there's that.”

It was a small comfort. But Sören still felt like his world had come apart at the seams.

Anthony got up and gestured to the coffee and breakfast laid out on his desk. "You should eat something... I can make tea, if you would prefer tea.”

“Please,” Dooku said.

As they ate and had coffee and tea, Anthony pulled out a small address book from his desk. "This has a list of contacts approved by our department for anything you might need - handymen, housekeeping, doctors." He glanced at the girls, and back at the three men. "Attorneys."

"Jesus," Maglor said.

"Again, always better to be prepared and have something you don't need, than need something you don't have. And it goes without saying but if there's an emergency of *any* kind - medical, legal, natural disaster - call Letitia or myself as soon as possible, even if you're getting it handled. We need to know what's going on with you... we have to be as careful as possible after what happened."

When they were all ready, Anthony took them out to a company van, unmarked, a neutral grey. Sören called shotgun, getting in the passenger seat. The girls were getting fussy again and he held Kate on his lap, while Maglor held Tori. Outside surrounded by the green of Sydney, Sören felt the Force more sharply, and he was able to tune in and figure out the girls were hungry. He fed Kate as Anthony drove, quiet, his eyes on the road.

They drove to what appeared to be one of the ritzier districts of Sydney - houses were larger, fewer and farther between... estates with tracts of land. At last they came to a two-story mansion on Bellevue Hill, on a circular cul-de-sac. There was parking in front of the house, rectangular and modern-looking with smooth light grey walls, lots of windows, the house framed by palm trees and native Australian trees and shrubbery.

"This is a bit extravagant on the government's dime, já?" Sören's eyebrow went up. "This is, like, ten times the size of what we had in Akureyri." Sören snorted. "I don't know who was the posh twat who picked this out, but..."

"***I am the posh twat.***" Anthony shot Sören a withering look.

Sören had to stop himself from saying *Hi The Posh Twat, I'm Sören.* "Oh. Well. Sorry." He wasn't really.

Once they got out of the van, Anthony said, "It's more practical than you might think it is. Your location means you won't have neighbors as close by as you did in Akureyri, which is less room for exposure. And we wanted to ensure you would be comfortable."

"I guess fucking so." Sören let out a low whistle. "Damn, it's big."

That's what he said, Anthony broadcasted. Sören tried not to grin, not wanting Anthony to realize he'd heard that. "Five bedrooms, four baths," Anthony said.

"That's... that's a lot." *I bet he said that, too.* Sören found himself wondering just how big Anthony was... *Dammit brain, could you not.*

Their things had been brought to the van with a hand truck, which Dooku rolled inside now. Just the entrance room was huge, and flooded with natural sunlight. Anthony had them follow and they made their way into an even bigger room - an open plan living room and kitchen, tastefully furnished in the colors of the sea, pale blues and greys and white, large couches and armchairs in solid colors with cozy-looking throws and pillows. The floors were dark hardwood and matched the wooden coffee table and the wooden finish on the cupboards in the kitchen, with a large kitchen island done in white marble. The living room had a gas fireplace with a mantle. There were sliding glass doors in the living area that led out to a freeform-shape inground swimming pool inside a garden with high walls, a nice shaded area with palm trees and other trees, and there was a space beyond the garden that gave a gorgeous view of Sydney Harbour, crystal blue under the summer sun.

"*Jesus.*" Sören couldn't believe it. This was luxurious beyond his wildest dreams and he hadn't even been past the main room yet.

"I hope you find it satisfactory," Anthony said, with an edge to his voice that told Sören he was still annoyed about the "posh twat" comment. He looked at his watch - an expensive Rolex - and then he said, "All right. This is where I take my leave, I've got paperwork to file."

"Are you going right back to London or are you staying in Australia a bit?" Sören had no idea why he was asking this. *What, do you want to see this guy again?* Not that he could entirely blame himself... now he was staring at Anthony's firm, shapely ass, stopping before he could head out.

"I'll be in Australia at least two weeks to make sure you're getting settled in, and I'll check in with you before then. There are new cell phones for you in the kitchen drawer, top right next to the stove. They've been programmed with my number and Letitia's."

"OK." And Sören now felt the slightest twinge of guilt for the "posh twat" comment - even though Anthony did indeed seem to be a posh twat, between his Rolex and the upper-class London accent, and having a double-barrel surname. "Ah... thank you. For everything."

Anthony turned around and gave Sören a thin, practiced smile that did not meet his eyes. "I hope everything goes well for you here." He looked at the three of them.

Sören picked up the girls from their pram and marched them over to Anthony, trying to be friendly, not wanting Anthony to take things too personal. "Can you say bye-bye?"

"Ah. Ra," Kate said. "Ra ra ra."

"Ra ra ra ra ra," Tori said.

Anthony's eyes softened and he gave a genuine smile now, his eyes crinkling at the corners; Sören's breath caught. "All right. I must be getting on."

Sören nodded. "OK. We'll see you soon-ish?"

"A fortnight, thereabouts. If you need anything before then, call me." Anthony gave him a mock stern look. "Stay out of trouble."

Sören couldn't resist a cheeky grin. "I am trouble."

"Yes. *I know.*" With that, Anthony Hewlett-Johnson was out the door.

Chapter 23

Sören, Dooku and Maglor spent a long time on Thursday just taking it all in, touring the spacious new home. Two of the five bedrooms and two of the four bathrooms were ground level, with the other three bedrooms and two bathrooms up on the second floor. The garden and pool area was accessible by the glass sliding doors in the living room, and the open yard space was accessible by the back door - closer to where the ground-level bedrooms and bathrooms were, which was also where the staircase was. As it turned out there were more rooms in the house than just the bedrooms and the open plan living room and kitchen area, but there was also what looked like a second living room past the bedrooms, closest to the back door, and there were two such spaces upstairs, one closer to the stairwell and one towards the end of the second floor. Sören still thought it was all a bit excessive, especially when they had fewer possessions now than they did in Akureyri, but he knew he couldn't complain too much, especially when one of the bathrooms had a jacuzzi facing a large window that was on their view of Sydney Harbour. This was the sort of living situation he would have given his eyeteeth to have growing up poor, something he'd never dreamed possible, and now it had fallen into their laps.

Of course, it had fallen on them, and Sören was still reeling from the impact.

The first order of business was for Dooku and Maglor to call a cab. Sören took a nap on one of the living room couches while they were out, with the girls sleeping soundly in their pram nearby. Two hours later Dooku and Maglor came home in new cars, Dooku with a Jaguar and Maglor with a Bentley, both sleek and black. Letitia had been against them driving "ostentatious" vehicles in Akureyri where it would stick out much more - plus a jeep was much more practical for getting around Iceland in the winter - but Anthony had no issue with them driving more expensive vehicles, since they were already living in a well-to-do part of Sydney, in a mansion, it would have been more incongruous for them to drive something less flashy. Sören got the sense Anthony himself probably drove a nice car; he very much gave the impression as being from money.

Looking at Maglor's new Bentley, Sören had remembered "Alejandro" driving a Jaguar in Reykjavik, so he found the change curious.

"You know, Ingwion drove a Bentley," Sören teased. "Is this your tribute to your boyfriend?"

Maglor facepalmed. "He is not my boyfriend."

Sören pressed on, desperately needing some levity after what they'd been through lately. "You should name your car Ingwion."

"I am not naming my car."

"Hi Not Naming My Car -"

Dooku had Maglor and Sören get in his Jaguar, and they made three trips, first to a pet supply store to pick up new items for Huan as well as the impending arrival of the cats - dog food and bowls, cat food and bowls, a water fountain and additional water dispenser, a domed litter box and cat litter, two cat trees, a selection of cat and dog toys. The second trip was to a department store to get more clothing for themselves and the girls since they'd lost most of their clothes back in Iceland. The last trip was to a grocery store, where they also bought diapers and more baby food and formula in addition to things for meals and snacks. Their bedrooms were mostly furnished - one of the bedrooms on the ground

floor had been designated as a nursery, with two cribs waiting - but they would eventually want to go shopping for things to make it their own. In the meantime, these were essentials.

Sören and Maglor got to work setting up the items for Huan and the cats, as Dooku unloaded the groceries, took an inventory of what cookware and appliances were in the kitchen and what he might need, and then got right to work making dinner to put in the slow cooker that he found in the kitchen with various other appliances. Once the babies had been fed and things for the cats and dog were arranged, Sören and Maglor took Huan outside, sitting out at a picnic table in the yard looking out at Sydney Harbour, drinking lemonade as Huan ran around. It felt surreal; Sören was still having a hard time believing all of this.

"Justin used to make fun of me for being poor," Sören said. "You know, working as a barista, coming from nothing..." Sören snorted.

Maglor had that murderous "I'd kill him again" look on his face that he always had when Sören brought up Justin. "It takes a certain amount of deplorability to mock the less fortunate," Maglor said, scowling into his lemonade. "Kicking someone when they're already down -"

"Jæja, obviously I... wasn't in a good place when I was with him." Sören sighed. Then he gave a bitter chuckle, looking at the sparkling waters of Sydney Harbour, and around at the lush green of their yard, the back view of their gorgeous new home. "He'd fucking shit himself if he could see me now." With that, Sören raised both middle fingers in the air. "Hope you can see this in hell, you piece of shit," he called out.

Maglor grinned at Sören. "I love you, you know."

"I love you too." Sören dragged Maglor up from the picnic table. "Come on, let's unpack the rest of our stuff."

"We should put our new clothes away first, hang and fold them..."

"Oh, all right."

When they were mostly done going through the new clothes and had started a washload of underwear, the doorbell rang. Dooku got to it before Sören and Maglor did, and Sören watched as Dooku signed for a delivery - he looked down and saw three cat carriers.

After the door was closed and the deliveryman on his way, Dooku opened up the cat carriers. Snúður, Pumpkin and Rasputin wandered out of their cages and began sniffing around. Sören made a high-pitched noise and started crying with sheer relief at seeing his cats again. "My babies," he cooed through his tears. "Oh god, my babies..."

Instead of unpacking the stuff they'd brought to Canada and Australia, Sören and Maglor ended up curling up together on the couch, fussing over the cats. Sören couldn't stop crying for a good while, his tears of relief over having his cats again mixing with relief over finally being home, and grief for the home he'd lost, the uncertainty and fear of the future. Maglor pet Sören with one hand, and the cats with the other, and Sören soaked Maglor's T-shirt with how much he cried.

Sören cried himself into a nap; Dooku woke them up for dinner, having made a chicken curry that Sören raved about. The girls were fed, and the cats crunched and slurped away happily at their cat food. Things felt peaceful and almost normal.

Almost.

The girls were bathed then changed and put down to sleep, and then Sören and Maglor took Huan for a walk through the new neighborhood as the sun set. Sören took in the lush green of the rolling land and the trees, the distance between mansions. Back at their own mansion, Sören, Dooku and Maglor took turns showering and after their showers they sat together drinking champagne in the jacuzzi, which had an amazing view of Sydney Harbour at sunset. Sören thought the view of his husbands sitting naked in the hot tub was just as gorgeous, but he was too exhausted to do anything about it, and they were just as exhausted as he was, so they went to bed to cuddle and sleep.

Sören was woken up twice in the middle of the night to tend to the girls, Dooku going with him the first time and Maglor the second time. Though Sören was able to get back to sleep, he still felt drained and out of it when he got up on Friday morning.

But, the house needed to become a home, for all their sakes, so after a light breakfast of fruit and toast, Sören, Dooku and Maglor got to work unpacking the things they'd brought through the Portal, as well as the things that Anthony had arranged to ship from Iceland. Sören cried as he went through his paintings, remembering what he was told:

...you have a very distinctive style of painting. ...If you showcase your work anywhere public, such as a gallery, even using an assumed name, there is a risk of exposure, lines connected between Sören Sigurðsson and Stefan Kierkegaard, and that's a problem. You ran a studio in Akureyri. You've done exhibits in Reykjavik and London. Even with being on the other side of the world, there's a chance that you will run into someone from those art circles, or someone who knows someone. Regardless, it's not safe for you to show your work with your current style, and won't be for some time. By all means, keep producing art, just know that your current style must be limited in its exposure and anything meant for public consumption either needs to be in a different style or a different medium altogether.

The irony that he had *just* gotten back into the groove with his art after a dry spell following the Dagorath, and now he was going to have to keep it private for the foreseeable future - probably at least the next couple of decades. Sören created for himself first and foremost, he was still making art when he was with Justin even though he'd stopped showing anywhere thanks to Justin's verbal abuse... but he had decidedly less motivation when he wasn't producing for an audience. Art, and the sharing of art, had helped keep him together all these years, and now...

Sören shoved that train of thought away, knowing that road went back to becoming a living blanket heap not doing much of anything and he needed to not fall apart again for his daughters' sake. He forced himself to focus on something else - Dooku and Maglor were debating where to hang the sword rack, and display their two swords.

Then Dooku said, "I did some research on Google when I couldn't get back to sleep after getting up with you to tend to the babies, and we are a seven-minute drive from Bondi Beach. Would you like to go to the beach?"

Maglor sprang right up, and Sören managed to laugh at that.

They got ready - Sören brought swim trunks that he'd bought yesterday - and got the girls ready, and shipped out in Dooku's Jaguar.

Bondi Beach was very different than the beaches Sören was used to in Iceland. White sand, rocks, waves being ridden by surfers. There were a fair amount of people laying on the beach soaking up the sun, as well as people swimming in the ocean. Sören put waterproof sunblock on the girls and he carried them on a baby sling as he waded into the sea, smiling at the warm water. He thought about baby swimming lessons for the pool

back home. In the meantime the girls were fascinated by the water, making happy noises as they watched the waves, and Sören let them splash around a little, spluttering as Kate decided to splash him, and he could have sworn Tori laughed.

When Sören brought the girls back to shore, Maglor took them, and then Dooku picked Sören up - making Sören squeal and laugh - and Dooku carried him into the water. Holding Dooku and being held in the waves was a sweet, tender moment that Sören burned into his memories, savoring that feeling of closeness with him... that no matter what, they always had each other.

Dooku and Sören came out of the water to find Maglor was carrying the girls in a baby sling, strolling along the shore, singing - now singing as much to the girls as he was at the waves. For the briefest instant Sören could see through Maglor's glamour to the full truth of him, the silver aura, the flood of hair to his thighs, the gem-like flash of his eyes. Sören knew Maglor hadn't dropped his glamour, he was just seeing past it, right down to the hair stirring in the breeze.

Sören wondered about that on the way home. He had looked through Maglor's glamour without trying. And he knew that when he saw with his mind's eye for his art, he saw the deeper reality of a person, without trying. After what happened to Dag, he still felt ill at ease around strangers, spending much of yesterday feeling high anxiety at stores; today he hadn't panicked at Bondi Beach, but he was also still tired. He wondered if he could consciously train himself to start looking at people and seeing if they were really who they presented themselves to be or not. It might be a useful survival skill later.

In the meantime, the mental image of Maglor carrying the girls, singing to them as he strolled along the shore, was precious and beautiful. Sören wanted to at least sketch it to preserve the memory more tangibly. When they got home he looked through the sketchbooks he'd brought, trying to find the one he was working on in Nina's truck...

...and that sketchbook was missing. He'd left it in the truck.

"FUCK," Sören yelled. He was so angry with himself that he started to cry, and got even angrier with himself for crying. *All I fucking do is cry, like a whiny baby. I am a grown-ass man. I am a parent now. I can't be like this.* The girls, who had been peaceful after the beach, were now getting agitated, crying with them.

Sören tried to pull himself together for the girls, but he was struggling; Maglor came in and sang, calming them all down. Then after the girls were put down for a nap, Maglor spooned Sören on the bed. They lay there in silence for a few minutes and finally Maglor asked, "What's wrong, love?"

"I don't want to talk about it right now."*I don't want to fall apart again.*

The rest of Friday was relatively cozy and content despite Sören's lingering upset at now two important things he forgot; Dooku grilled out in the yard and they ate dinner outside. There was another dip in the jacuzzi before tangling up together to sleep.

And then on Saturday afternoon, Dooku went furniture shopping while Sören and Maglor stayed home. When Maglor was reading to the girls, Sören once again wished he had his sketchbook and he broke down.

"I know you didn't want to talk about it yesterday but now you're going to talk about it," Maglor said, giving Sören a stern look.

"I lost one of my sketchbooks," Sören choked out. "It had some old pictures in it - like of Dag, and... and..." Sören doubled over, bawling.

And of course, he didn't have Nina's contact information - he didn't even have Nina's real name.

"Maybe you could call Anthony to ask Nina if..." Maglor raised an eyebrow.

Sören vehemently shook his head. "He's busy, I should only bother him if it's an emergency. This isn't an emergency."

"You're upset enough that it feels like one."

"Jæja, I'm a big baby." Sören sniffled and cried some more. He didn't want to explain stuff to Anthony and cry in front of him. He didn't even want to cry in front of Maglor right now. "I guess I'll just suck it up."

Maglor sighed and pinched the bridge of his nose.

The girls were getting agitated again by Sören crying - heaping on the guilt. Maglor got Sören distracted by the two of them loading the girls in the pram and pushing the pram as they took Huan for a walk. After their walk there was a nap.

Sören woke up from his nap in the evening, feeling like someone was watching him from far away. He could feel the eyes on the girls, searching for something...

Sören shoved with the Force, as hard as he could, and shouted into the mind of whoever was doing it. *Don't you EVER fucking do that again.*

Now he had something to worry about more than the loss of his sketchbook.

_

Adelaide, Australia

It was Saturday night, but Alinta Jonsson's boss was known to call her for jobs at any time, and likewise, Ali could call him if it was important.

This was important. It had been weighing on her mind since she'd flown back from Sydney - she still didn't understand why she had to drive to Alice Springs and fly back from Sydney, why she couldn't have flown both ways, which made this entire assignment seem that much more clandestine, like her cousin was definitely on the run from something and everything going into his transport had to be just so.

And the way he had shoved her out of his head when she reached out earlier that evening... he was *terrified.* Ali had already gotten the feeling he'd seen some shit when he rode in her truck, but now...

She flipped through the sketchbook again, even as it felt a bit wrong, like she was going through something as intimate as an underwear drawer. She lingered on a sketch of herself riding a battle kangaroo, which made her smile, and then a more serious sketch of her wandering the outback. It was as if on a subconscious level he knew that she was family, somehow, that she belonged here in this sketchbook with other drawings of his family.

He had been so lovable, squeaking at those damn kangaroos. As scared as he was, he'd still found something positive on the trip. She wished there was something she could do to make him feel less afraid - feeling protective of her cousin even though he was older. Ali

swallowed hard, her eyes misting. *My family needs me, even if he doesn't know he needs me.*

She sighed and closed the sketchbook before she could break down.*Let's start with getting this sketchbook back to him, and start from there.*

With the sketchbook on her lap, she waved her hand and her cell phone flew over. She dialed Murdock's number.

"Murdock, I need a favor."

"What is it."

Ali took a deep breath. "I need the contact info of the person who gave you the Protocol Delta assignment that you sent me on recently."

"No. Can't do that, sorry."

"Why not?"

"That's part of the protocol -"

"Fuck protocol. If they come down on you, give them an excuse, like... your computer was hacked, or your phone was stolen, or something. Anything. *Please.* Murdock. You know how I am. I normally don't ask for things. I'm proud. But now? I'm begging you. This is important."

"I can't, but even if I could, I don't understand why you need that info."

"One of the three people I was transporting in that assignment left something behind in my truck. Something valuable."

"Oh well, I guess it sucks to be them, don't it?" A wry chuckle. "They'll learn to be more careful this time -"

"No, *you don't understand.* When I say valuable, I mean..." Ali decided to bluff, as much as she despised doing so. *This is for a good cause.* "This is something that shouldn't have been left behind, and if it had been a driver other than me, well... let's just say it's a good thing I'm the one who did this job. This is a very sensitive thing, connected to why they had to move in the first place." *In a way, I'm not wrong,* Ali told herself, remembering the sketches of the scientist who disappeared.

There was a pause, and though Ali was still concerned Murdock would say no, the fact that he hadn't immediately shouted her down, argued back with her, and hadn't hung up yet was hopeful.

Finally Murdock said. "All right, lass. The person you want to get in touch with is a Mr. Hewlett-Johnson. I can't promise that he'll help you, but -"

"Look, if I can talk to him, we'll take it from there. Please, I need his contact info. Phone, preferably." E-mails could be too easily ignored.

"You got a pen and paper?"

"I do."

_

All right, here goes nothing. Ali took a few deep breaths, and punched in the number she was told to call.

One ring. Two. "Anthony Hewlett-Johnson."

"Right, hello, Mr. Hewlett-Johnson. My name is Alinta Jonsson and I work as a driver for Borovkov Enterprises, and there is a matter of particular importance that you might be able to help me with."

A pause. "How did you get this number?" He had a crisp, well-bred London accent, a soft but commanding baritone.

"I would rather not say. Everything surrounding why I'm calling you is of a sensitive nature." Ali squared her shoulders. "I was on a Protocol Delta assignment, I assume you know what that means -"

Click.

"Shit." Ali took some more deep breaths and then she hit the number again.

Four rings and it went to voice mail. Ali hung up and tried again. And tried again. And tried again.

Finally he answered his phone. "Ms. Jonsson, I really don't have time for this."

"Neither do I but this is *urgent* -"

"Ms. Jonsson, I should not even be acknowledging to you that *I* know what Protocol Delta is, on my end, but here it is. You are not supposed to discuss the details of these assignments. With anyone. Period. You do understand what the word 'classified' means."

Ali was bristling. "Of course I *fucking* know what 'classified' means, you..." She choked back a string of insults. Being talked to like she was stupid by someone with that posh accent... *If I didn't know better I'd think I was on the phone with Benedict Fucking Cumberbatch.* "Can I get a word in? Please?"

"Are you going to keep calling me every five minutes until I let you or am forced to change my number?"

"You do understand what the word 'urgent' means, Mr. Hewlett-Johnson."

A short pause. "Go on."

"One of the three passengers I had on the assignment left something behind in my truck. It needs to be returned to them."

"'Need' is a relative term, Ms. Jonsson. Material objects can be easily replaced, the value of which do not outweigh the need to protect the privacy of everyone involved."

"This is not something that can be replaced. I would rather not say what it is over the phone, but it is more valuable than you think it is."

A telltale small sigh. "If you drop it off at the Borovkov Enterprises office nearest you, or I can coordinate to have one of our employees come pick it up -"

"With all due respect, Mr. Hewlett-Johnson, this is something I'd rather deliver in-person. I

have no guarantee that someone else will safely bring it to him. I can only guarantee what I would do myself."

"Ms. Jonsson, while I appreciate your conscience and your work ethic, the location of the parties involved is classified for your protection as well as theirs. However if it is as important, urgent, and irreplaceable as you say it is, I'm willing to come by myself, pick it up, and personally see to its delivery, and I give you my word that it will be done."

"No. This is something I need to do myself."

"I'm afraid I don't understand, in that case."

"It's important, urgent, and irreplaceable because it's of a sensitive nature. I've already seen what it is, but I don't know enough about your role in the food chain here to know if this is something that you should be seeing yourself." It was another bluff, Ali knew there was likely a damn good chance Hewlett-Johnson had that clearance. "And I feel like the less eyes that see this, the better it will be for the aforementioned protection of the parties involved."

There was a long pause, and for a moment Ali felt like someone or something was in the room with her. She felt a pair of eyes on her, that feeling of being stared at, but it felt like it was from far away. And then, for an instant, she felt like the eyes were looking directly into her mind, and somehow knew she was bluffing, yet also knew there was more to the story than she was getting into over the phone.

"I can't help you, Ms. Jonsson. You can either give me the object that needs to be returned and I will do so, or we can end this conversation and I'll try to forget that you broke protocol by asking your boss who his boss is and how to get in touch with me."

*Shit, he knows I got his info from Murdock. Of course he does...*Ali shuddered at that feeling of having been *seen*. "How about a third option: tell me who you work for and I'll ask them for the info I need myself."

Click.

Ali growled, and restrained the urge to throw her phone across the room.

I'm not done with you yet, Anthony Hewlett-Johnson. She would let it go for today, and try again tomorrow. She was going to wear him down - she had felt that touch of power, like her own, and she knew he wouldn't have done remote viewing if there wasn't at least a tiny chance he'd be willing to accede her request for help.

It also made her wonder just what *exactly* was going on with Borovkov Enterprises, if there was someone else like her afoot, involved in giving classified assignments. After all, Ingmar Borovkov was notorious for being mysterious - no pictures of him anywhere, nobody knew what he looked like, he conducted his business through agents. Having things like this in his company... *Who the bloody hell am I working for, really?*

Chapter 24

Ali continued to try to get a hold of Anthony Hewlett-Johnson all day Sunday and throughout Monday morning and afternoon. When it became clear he wasn't taking her calls - Ali suspected he had her number blocked - she stomped off into the backyard and let out a scream of frustration.

Kenny came out a few minutes later and gently put an arm around her.

"This obstinate *twat*," Ali said, with the phone hovering a few feet in front of her, glaring at Anthony Hewlett-Johnson's number on her contacts screen. "I get it that something very bad is going on here, but for fuck's sake, why don't they want me to bring this bloody sketchbook?"

"Probably because something very bad is going on," Kenny said, "like whatever it was that made that scientist disappear. They're trying to keep the same thing from happening to him, I guess, and they don't want to make it easy to get information out of you if, you know, it's discovered you drove him to Sydney."

"Yeh. Just..." Ali growled. "This twat, Anthony... this posh fucking twat with a hyphenated fucking surname -"

"Our kids have a hyphenated surname," Kenny pointed out.

Ali glared at him and went on, "Posh fucking twat asking me if I know what bloody fucking 'classified' fucking means. I swear on me *mum* if I ever meet this twat in person I'm going to slap him, and he's bloody fucking *earnt* it."

"Well, I mean, he's doing his job," Kenny said. "Even if he's your boss's boss, he doesn't know *you*, and if things are this bad he has to err on the side of caution. It's really maddening and it sucks. I know. But if he was giving out your cousin's contact information to every random person, that would be a problem."

Ali sighed. She knew he was right, but right now she needed a convenient target for her anger. "He's still a twat. Who won't take my calls."

Kenny scratched his head and rubbed his chin, and then Ali watched as Kenny's cell phone flew out of his pocket. He passed it to Ali. "Here. He doesn't have *my* number blocked." Kenny gave her a mischievous grin.

Ali affectionately mussed Kenny's hair and gave him a quick peck. "Thanks, love."

—

"Anthony Hewlett-Johnson."

"It's me again."

An exasperated breath. "Ms. Jonsson, I am going to ask you politely*one time* to leave me alone."

"Mr. Hewlett-Johnson, *please.* I'm trying to be careful what I say over the phone..." That much, at least, was not a lie. She didn't know how much risk she'd be putting herself at - or him - by mentioning she was 99% sure one of those passengers was her cousin. "There's more to this story than I can tell you over the phone. It's complicated. And something tells me you understand a thing or two about complicated."

"I've told you I can't help you."

"*You* don't have to help me. Just do what you know Murdock did for me - you know, *what you figured out without me telling you*." A thinly veiled threat, an *I know what you are* push.

"It was a matter of deduction as to how you would have gotten my number."

"Mhm." *Sure it is.* "Give me your boss's info and I'll leave you alone. I know they may not be willing to help me either, but at least it'll be out of your hands, right?"

Click.

–

"Fetherstonhaugh."

"Letitia, we have a potential situation."

"Don't you always, Anthony."

"There is a certain employee on the books of Borovkov Enterprises - one Alinta Johanna Jonsson, truck driver. Aboriginal, twenty-seven years old, lives in Adelaide. She's been calling me regarding a recent Protocol Delta job. You know the one - bringing our three snowflakes to Sydney."

"I see. What does she want?"

"One of them left something in her truck. She wants it returned. She wants to do it *herself*. Naturally, I can't give out a home address. She's been asking me for your contact info so she can go above me and ask you for this information, as if she thinks her likelihood of hearing 'no' will go down the higher up she goes."

"Hmm. And she's being a real pain in your arse?"

"With the prospect of it getting worse, and I'm not keen on changing my number if it's all the same to you."

"All right. Give her my number. I can say no."

"She won't take no for an answer, Letitia, or I would have already given her that info and pretended I knew nothing about how she got it."

Letitia snorted. "Thanks, Anthony. Twat."

Anthony blew a kiss over the phone. "I wanted to be very sure you had the heads up before I went ahead, you know what you're getting into. So if you're very sure -"

"Yeah, I don't see the harm in it, go ahead."

"I hope it won't cause you *too* much aggravation."

"It probably won't."

"Famous last words." *Click.*

_

Kenny got in from the supermarket with Megadeth and Metallica in tow, and found Ali sitting on the couch with her head in her hands, moping.

"Hey, babe. What's wrong?"

Ali made a noise.

"Well, hey... the kids are gonna help me with dinner. We'll be out on the deck after we put these groceries away, all right?"

Ali nodded.

When Kenny and the kids got to work assembling the barbecue, Ali put the telly on to try to distract herself, begin the process of dialing back her negative mood at least long enough to not be grumpy around her kids, not wanting them to see her like this. She wasn't paying attention, just zoning out, hugging a pillow, curled up in the fetal position on the couch, but at least the sound of another voice was enough to begin bringing her out of her head somewhat.

And then there was a knock on the door. Ali raised an eyebrow - she wasn't expecting anyone tonight. She thought about ignoring it, but there it was again. She got up and answered the door. There was nobody there - the sound of a car driving off - and on the doormat, an envelope had been dropped.

Ali had reservations about strange envelopes dropped off under shady circumstances, but something told her to go ahead, proceeding with caution. When she was sure nobody was looking, she waved her hand and the envelope "blew" in to the house, and once the door was closed, with the envelope hovering in front of her several feet off the floor, she used her mind to open it, and withdrew the business card she saw inside. A Borovkov Enterprises business card for one Letitia Fetherstonhaugh floated into her hand.

"Thank you, Anthony," Ali muttered under her breath, and then, "You're still a twat."

_

Ali steeled herself, taking a few deep breaths before she dialed the number on the card. Her hand was shaking. She didn't quite understand *why* she was this nervous, apart from feeling like she had fallen down the rabbit hole and she was newly entering Wonderland.

Ali punched in the number on her cell before she could lose her nerve. One ring. Two. Three. "Come on, *come on*," Ali huffed.

"Fetherstonhaugh."

"Yes, hi, hello... Letitia Fetherstonhaugh? You don't know me but my name is Alinta -"

"Jonsson? Truck driver for Borovkov Enterprises." A wry chuckle. "Yes, I was warned about you."

Oh lady, you don't know *what I'm capable of where my family is concerned.* "I see. So you've been told the predicament I'm in, then."

"Ms. Jonsson, I can personally vouch for Anthony being trustworthy enough to take the item in question directly to your passenger. I understand and appreciate why you'd feel more comfortable doing it yourself, but it's been explained to you that for safety reasons we cannot and will not release the passenger's contact information."

"I had rather hoped I could reason with you, Ms. Fetherstonhaugh. I understand Anthony Hewlett-Johnson may not be in a position to authorize the release of the contact information, but maybe you can level with me here."

"There is nothing to -"

"*Look*, Ms. Fetherstonhaugh. The assignment I was given may be classified, but I'm not *stupid.* There was all this secrecy involved because the people I transported are in some kind of trouble or some kind of danger, or both. What I have in my hand is potentially going to throw gasoline on the fire in the wrong hands -"

"All the more reason for Anthony to be the one to deliver the item."

"- and out of all the drivers at Borovkov Enterprises, I was chosen for the job of bringing them to Sydney. Me and not some other random Joe. Surely, you must have done some sort of background check on me and seen that I was trustworthy, responsible... that I'm not in bed with whoever you're trying to protect my passengers from."

"Oh, I'm sure you're not. My decision still stands, however. We need you to not become of interest to the wrong people if there's ever a breach in the system and it comes out you transported a certain three individuals. If you were picked up by the wrong people and asked questions, we need you to not have answers that can easily be given through truth serum or enhanced interrogation methods. That sort of thing."

"I'm a big girl, I can handle myself."

"Can you? A lot of people talk tough until the actual shit hits the fan. If it's all the same to you, I'd rather not find out whether you're all talk. That could be bad for a lot of people besides you."

Ali's blood was boiling. "You don't know," she said quietly, "what I can or can't do."

"No. I don't. Which is why you're not getting that information."

Click.

Ali let out another scream of frustration. "What is it with you posh fucking*twats* and your

fucking -" Ali pulled on her dreadlocks. "ARGH. ARRRRRRRRRRRGH."

–

After sausage sizzles and salad for dinner, Ali and Kenny curled up on the couch together while Metallica and Megadeth played with Legos on the floor a few feet away.

"How goes it?" Kenny asked. "Is he still not taking your calls?"

Ali made a noise. "I got the number of his boss and she's being even more..." Ali made a vague hand gesture and another noise.

"I see." Kenny folded his arms and scowled - Ali knew that face, and knew Kenny was thinking. After a moment Kenny turned to her and said, "So when you're talking to these people, like... what specifically are you telling them? What are you asking for?"

"Well, I'm not telling them it's a sketchbook, they would probably think I'm making a big to-do over a lot of nothing, though, judging from what I've seen in the sketchbook it's not a lot of nothing. He's *good*, like professional artist good." *Like there's actual magic in his art, good.* "What I am telling them is that it's an important item. Anthony offered to deliver it himself and I told him no. Yes, I was being honest when I said it would bug my conscience less to bring it there myself and personally make sure it gets there. I left out that part about how it's my cousin and I'd like to get in touch with him."

"Why? Why haven't you mentioned that?"

"On the off chance I'm wrong. Or..." Ali swallowed hard. "On the off chance that they decide now *I'm* potentially a problem and they want to send us off god-knows-where at the drop of a hat. Plus, I have to get into it with my family history. To be honest, I'm surprised they don't already know if..." *If what? They're a front for government agency stuff? But that's crazy.*

"Well, you're just a truck driver, so I mean, they wouldn't necessarily do a full-on background check of every blood relative you have ever, they would just want to make sure of a clean arrest record and -"

"Yeh." Ali nodded. "But in any case, something in me is making me hold off on playing those cards."

"OK. And when you say you want to personally make sure it gets there -"

"I mean I'm asking for his contact information."

"Hm, OK." Kenny nodded. "*Thaaaaaaaat* might be your problem. If they're trying to protect your cousin and his, ah... boyfriends or whatever it is, from the same shit that the scientist ran into, they're not going to want to be giving out his home address and such."

"Yeh, but not even a cell number, so I can call him myself?"

"They probably don't want you meeting at all, but at the very least not at his house, no. So..." Kenny raised an eyebrow. "There's no chance you're gonna drop this, huh?"

"He's my cousin. I have to try."

"Mkay." Kenny nodded again. "Can you dial it back a few notches? Like instead of asking for contact info, ask if they can set up a neutral meeting ground, someplace that isn't his house, where he can come meet you and get the thing? Like anywhere. A McDonald's, the Opera House, somewhere."

"That's... actually brilliant. I wish I'd thought of that." Ali threw her arms around Kenny. "OK, lemme go call her again -"

Ali sprang from the couch, had her cell phone float into her hand, and hit Letitia's number. As it was ringing she attempted to run down the hall to have less noise and distraction... and she stepped on a Lego.

"Fetherstonhaugh."

"JESUS FUCKING *CHRIST* FUCKING MOTHERFUCK SHITTING BALLS FUCKING *CUNT*," Ali screamed, hopping as her foot throbbed from the Lego.

Click.

"Oh shit," Ali gasped, realizing she'd said that into the phone. "OH SHIT OH CHRIST OH *FUCK* DAMMIT FUCK FUCKING SHIT BOLLOCKS WANKING CRAPTITS FUCKING SHITBALLS *FFFFFFFFFFFFFFUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUCK*."

Ali frantically redialed Letitia's number. Four rings, no answer. She tried again. And again. And again. It became apparent that Letitia, too, was blocking her.

Kenny's cell phone floated a foot away from Ali. Ali reached out and grabbed it. She dialed Letitia's number on Kenny's phone.

Two rings in, "Fetherstonhaugh."

"Letitia it's Alinta Jonsson please *please* don't-hang-up-I-stepped-on-a-Lego."

A pause. Then, "You talk tough but you get like that when you step on a Lego.*Really.*"

"Oh, for the love of -" Ali grit her teeth, forcing back the slew of profanity wanting to rain down. She took a deep breath. "OK. *OK.* I get it that you don't want me to have my passengers' contact info."

"So why are you still bothering me?"

"Because." *You are getting on my last goddamn nerve, lady.*"Can you meet me halfway? I won't ask for the home address or a cell number. If you could coordinate a meeting at a place that isn't their home, or mine. Like, a Maccas, even. You pick the place, I don't care. That way I can deliver the item myself and no top-secret, classified information is revealed -"

"My answer is still no, Ms. Jonsson."

"*Why?*"

"I can't tell you why. I can only tell you no. And give you a piece of advice. Which is to stop making a nuisance of yourself, or I can make life very difficult for you." *Click.*

"Bitch," Ali spat. *I don't take kindly to your threats.*

Far from being a deterrent, Ali was even more determined now to scale this wall.

_

It took Ali a long time to get to sleep that night, and when she did sleep her dreams were troubled. She dreamed of herself in a body not her own - white skin, red hair, male - and she was captured by an evil, demonic-looking being who hung her by her right hand on the face of a mountain for what felt like ages. Mocked. Beaten. Starved. Then one day, her hand was cut off to free her.

And still, broken, she charged on, to find whatever it was she was looking for. Because she had to. Because she had *sworn* to.

Ali woke up screaming, "My oath! My oath!"

It was unsettling enough that she had to go look at herself in the mirror when she woke up, the familiar dark skin, the long dreadlocks, the hips that gave birth, the breasts. *Just brain soup, is all.* But her brain usually regurgitated random events, people, places, and things, and this was something else entirely. And somehow it was connected to whatever this was with her cousin. She didn't understand what.

Only that she had sworn in her heart to find him, and return what was his. Not just the sketchbook, but a connection to family. Hope, like lighting a flame in the dark.

Chapter 25

On Tuesday the fifteenth, after Ali had some coffee and the kids were at their last day of school before holiday break, she sat down to try to tackle the business of getting Letitia Fetherstonhaugh to help her. *Like blood from a stone.*

She thought about a further compromise, building on Kenny's idea and expanding it. But Letitia Fetherstonhaugh was now ignoring her phone *and* Kenny's. Ali drove to a department store, bought a cheap prepaid phone, and after she put airtime on it she sat with it in the parking lot.

"Fetherstonhaugh."

"What if you arranged for a private meeting at a neutral location like Maccas and you had me escorted by Anthony Hewlett-Johnson? Or another agent you trust. Or yourself even."

Click.

"God *dammit.*" Being hung up on without even so much as a "no" made her even angrier.

She took a detour on her drive home to try to calm down but she had obviously been crying - Kenny noticed when she arrived. He made her tea and they sat down with it.

For a few minutes they just sat in silence and finally Kenny said, "So she's not going to cooperate with you at all whatsoever."

"Nope."

"And there isn't a boss's boss above Letitia?"

"I don't know, but I'd probably run into the same firewall." Ali hung her head. "This is fucking infuriating."

"So you've hit a wall, but you're... not going to let this go."

"I *can't*, Kenny. If you were in the same position, if this was one of your cousins -"

Kenny put up a hand and nodded silently. "I get it." He took a deep breath.

"If I was face to face," Ali said, "maybe she could... I don't know, see how upset I am, maybe if she had a fucking shred of compassion she might level with me then. Or I could, you know." Ali waved her hand, making the teacup float to her. "Give her a little pushy push."

"Much as you don't like doing that."

"Well, no, I don't. It... you know. It feels gross, mind control shit, even if it's just this one thing and it's temporary. Desperate times call for desperate measures." Ali pursed her lips. "To be honest, I'd be willing to slap the shit out of her if I thought she'd give me the information I need." Ali folded her arms. "Actually, I think we're past the point of being polite and I'd have to go straight to being scary to get her to cooperate with me."

"Jesus, Ali."

But Kenny had known she was like this from the beginning - they'd met when she used to give outback tours and Kenny was taking photos, and Ali had been groped by an American tourist and before Kenny could jump to her defense, she had knocked the man down, stomped on his hands - breaking all of the man's fingers - and given him two black eyes with a hearty "Welcome to Australia, mate."

And now Kenny looked like he was thinking. Looked like he was up to something. Ali could practically see the gears spinning in his head.

"What's her name again?" Kenny asked.

"Letitia Fetherstonhaugh." Ali made the business card float over.

"OK. Lemme see... what I can do." Kenny got up and walked off to the study. "I gotta make some phone calls."

_

Four hours later, when Ali was taking a nap, Kenny gently shook her awake.

"Huh?" Ali sat up, groggy.

"OK, I have some... news," Kenny said, rubbing his hands together.

Ali waited for it.

"I talked to my brother Mike," Kenny said. Michael Kim was back in the States and worked in IT, specifically security - he was literally paid to hack and tell companies and agencies the weaknesses in their coding that could be exploited. "He did a little research for me."

"Did he now."

"A certain Cornelius Anthony Hewlett-Johnson and a Lady Letitia Fetherstonhaugh are both employees of MI6," Kenny said. "Anthony Hewlett-Johnson is also technically a *Captain* Anthony Hewlett-Johnson, he was in the SBS until 2015. Distinguished service record, he's a Gulf War vet, he's been decorated, blah blah blah."

Ali's jaw dropped. Her suspicion that at least a portion of Borovkov Enterprises was contracted by some Commonwealth government was confirmed. "How much trouble are we in for finding this out."

"Probably a lot," Kenny said, laughing. "Anyway, I assume that between Hewlett-Johnson and Fetherstonhaugh, you'd rather tangle with Fetherstonhaugh..."

Ali nodded. SBS-trained soldier who very likely had the same sort of gifts she had... she'd rather take her chances with Letitia.

"So," Kenny went on, "if you want to go find Letitia Fetherstonhaugh, and I'm not saying you should... of course, the home address she has on file is fake. But she works at the MI6 headquarters in London. Mike says, if you really want to go this route, he can hack into the driving database and tell you her plate number so you can use a drone to find her car and, like..."

"Stalk her?"

"Well, that's a really uncomfortable way of putting it, but..."

"But it's stalking her." Ali nodded.

"Yeah." Kenny cringed.

Ali also cringed. "Jesus."

Kenny got up to make coffee, and when he came back he and Ali just sat on the couch in silence for a little while, drinking coffee, taking it all in.

"So Mike's really on board with helping if I go through with this," Ali said. "Like... he knows I'm probably going to open a can of whoop-arse and if I get in trouble, he's potentially going to get up shit's creek as a collaborator..."

Kenny nodded solemnly. "Mike lives for this kind of shit. He hasn't hacked the motor vehicles database yet but he will when I give the word, and he knows where we can get a drone within a matter of hours, he'll walk you through programming the drone to spot her plates."

"OK." Ali rubbed her dreadlocks, feeling the weight of everything all at once.

"I don't think I need to tell you that what you're about to do is super illegal - hell, already what we've done is super illegal."

"No, you don't. And it is."

"And I won't lie to you - I'm worried about you getting caught, especially with our two kids."

"Yeh, no shit." Ali scowled - it would be particularly bad since she was the primary breadwinner. Not to mention that the kids would already face enough racism in their lifetime without their peers mocking them that their Aboriginal mother was in jail. Or suffer the effects of her being gone for however long...

"If I were a better partner, better father, better*person*, maybe I should try to talk you out of the idea of going off to England to go kick some MI6 agent's ass to try to get info out of them. But, I get that this is your family, and that's important to you, so I'll support your decision either way." Kenny gave a small, sad smile. "What's important to you is important to me - your family is my family too. I wouldn't have asked Mike for help if that wasn't the case."

"I appreciate it." Ali rubbed and patted his knee. "I have a lot to think on. Like, do the benefits outweigh the risks. Someone I'm pretty sure is my cousin, who I'd never met until last week, potentially going to jail to try to help them, when I have my other family, my partner and kids right here. Worst case scenario I'll go to jail or... MI6 will make me an unperson, make me disappear or something. Best case scenario, I'll have a new cousin to fuss over but also probably get sacked from Borovkov Enterprises and have to get another job -"

"To be honest, I'd be happier if you had a job where you don't have to leave on a moment's notice to be gone days at a time. I haven't wanted to complain because it pays well and I don't want to tell you what to do, but -"

Ali put up a hand. "No, Kenny, you should have said something before now." She sighed and ran her hands through her locks. "When I get back from this fiasco... well, if I get back... we'll give some time for the dust to settle and I'll look for another job."

"Doesn't have to be immediate. I mean, we're still going to the States for Christmas to see my family and all."

"Oh god." Ali rubbed her face. "It's that soon, yeah?"

Kenny nodded.

"Which is the other thing... the holidays are coming... I could*feel* how scared he was. How utterly *defeated* and *soul-tired* he is. If I could manage to see him before the holidays..." Ali's jaw trembled and her eyes teared up.

Kenny pulled Ali into a hug. He kissed the top of her head, then her forehead, then gave her a little peck.

"It's a lot to think about," Kenny said.

"Yeh. It would help if I had, like, a second opinion." Ali sat for a minute and drank her tea, considering.

Then it came to her. Her cell phone floated into her hand, and she dialed her father's number. One ring, two, three... *Come on, Da, pick up the damn phone.*

"Hello?" came her father's voice.

"Hi Da."

"Possum! What's going on?"

Ali looked at Kenny and then she said, "When the kids get out of school we're coming to see you in Ceduna."

"What for?" Then Böðvar Jónsson chuckled. "Not that I mind, you and Kenny and the kids are welcome anytime, it's just not every day you spontaneously want to come out -"

"I need a change of perspective." That wasn't a lie. "I'll explain more when I get there."

"O-OK. Well, safe journey, Possum."

Chapter 26

It was an eight and a half hour drive from Adelaide to Ceduna, and late when they arrived at Böðvar Jónsson's sheep farm on the night of Wednesday, December sixteenth. Metallica and Megadeth had already fallen asleep, and were put right to bed. Ali was exhausted but also too hyped up on adrenaline to go to sleep, as she'd spent the drive up weighing the decision back and forth in her mind, playing various outcomes in her head. Finally Ali's Aboriginal mother, Medika, made her a cup of chamomile tea and tucked her and Kenny in like Medika used to do when Ali was small, and Ali got a few hours of sleep before she heard her father going outside at dawn on Thursday morning, accompanied by his sheepdog, Auli.

Ali washed up, changed her clothes, and went outside, watching from a distance as the sheep grazed with Böðvar and Auli supervising. At last Böðvar sensed he was being watched, and gestured for Ali to come closer. He put an arm around his daughter.

Böðvar Jónsson was tall, of a formerly pale complexion that had been weatherbeaten by the Australian sun, and he had the strong, muscular build of someone who did hard physical labor daily for years, usually clad in jeans and a T-shirt, with a bandana around his neck or forehead. He had grey eyes like Ali's, black hair to the middle of his back that he usually wore tied back in a low ponytail, and a long black beard, both of which had begun to silver - in his younger years he had been boyish or even pretty in an androgynous way if he didn't have facial hair, hence why he grew the beard, and he was very proud of it, braiding both his hair and beard on special occasions. Ali always thought her father looked like a Viking warrior, especially when he went riding on his Harley-Davidson motorbike on the weekends, something he'd instilled an appreciation of in Ali - she missed motorcycling. Böðvar's voice was gruff but pleasant, the voice of a man who kept to himself but would also give you the shirt off his back if you needed it.

He and Medika Rogers made an interesting contrast - Medika was short, plump, curly black hair growing out in an 'afro' that now had touches of grey, coal-black skin with a gleaming white smile that lit up her entire face. Medika looked soft and motherly, and she was soft-spoken and gentle, but Ali knew her mother could be a force to be reckoned with. Ali never forgot the day Medika threatened one of her brother's gangbanger friends...

"So a change of perspective, huh?" Böðvar asked.

Ali nodded. "It's peaceful out here." She smiled at the pink-orange-red-gold dawn, washing the sheep a pale cream yellow. "And you and Mum are pretty no-nonsense, no-bullshit, common sense people. I could use some advice right about now."

"Oh shit, Possum, if you're asking for advice it must be bad." Böðvar's brow furrowed and he narrowed his eyes. "You and Kenny all right?"

"Yeh."

"The kids OK? Are they in trouble?"

"No trouble... no, all of that is fine, Da. It's something else."

"Hm." Böðvar looked back out at the sheep. "Jæja, you came to the right place, I guess. This is my own little piece of heaven, right here, out in the middle of nowhere. Animals are much easier to deal with than people. 'Course, younger me would have never seen

myself as a sheep farmer. I could have had the family farm back in Iceland, you know, but I thumbed my nose at that. Then by the time I thought seriously about maybe taking it after all, I had to leave."

"Had to... leave?" Ali folded her arms. She raised an eyebrow at her father. "Why*did* you leave Iceland, anyway? You never told me about that."

"It's kind of a long story."

"Well, I'll trade you one long story for another."

They went inside. Böðvar and Medika lived in a ranch-style house, all one floor, with four bedrooms and one bathroom, an open-plan living room and kitchen area that was always clean but a bit cluttered, between Böðvar's books and Medika's sewing and knitting projects. They had the same couch that Ali remembered sitting on as a child, with the same throw "of many colors" that Ali had asked her mum to make after the story of Joseph before Böðvar had caught wind of a neighbor proselytizing to a "heathen" Aboriginal child. The throw still had happy memories, and brightened up the house, which was mostly done in browns and greens with touches of grey.

Medika made tea, and Ali sat down to tea with her parents for the first time in what felt like ages. They sat in companionable silence for a few minutes, Böðvar watching the sheep out the window as the sunrise faded to blue sky, with Auli laying at his feet.

"So," Böðvar said, "I have two older sisters. One of them is dead now. A year before Brynhildur died, she told me and Birgitta to leave Iceland for our own good."

"...Why?" Ali asked.

"She and her husband Sigurð were being attacked."

"By what... who..."

"Odin."

Ali's laughter rang out despite herself. "Odin? The Norse fucking god, Odin?"

"Jæja, I know it sounds crazy, and I would have thought it crazy myself, but..." Böðvar lifted his tea mug without touching it, floating up to take a sip before it sat back down on the tray. "There were a lot of coincidences that started to look like not coincidences all piled together. Gitta and I were having nightmares about the one-eyed old bastard, knowing fuckall was going on with our sister, or with each other. When Brynhildur told us, and Gitta said she'd been having nightmares, I was... a little terrified of the confirmation. Going mad would have been better, yanno? And Brynhildur... she was seeing shit like... people getting into accidents around her, she and her husband narrowly avoiding accidents. Sigurð died real young, coroner said stroke but he was in perfect health. So Gitta took off for Scotland and I took off for Australia, 'cos I wanted to be as far away from any Nordic country as I could - where the Aesir influence and power is the strongest, yanno - and still be on planet Earth."

"I don't get it." Ali had chills. "What the bloody hell would Odin want with our family? Why us?"

"That I don't know. All I know is, Brynhildur was on Odin's shit list and she's dead now. And when you were born, and your brothers..." Böðvar looked at Medika.

"We had one of the shamans come out," Medika said, "and do a protective ritual over each of you, so spirits couldn't find you." She gestured to the window where the sheep were grazing. "We had this entire land warded."

Now Kenny was coming out. Ali floated over a cup of tea. Ali could tell Kenny was slightly uncomfortable - he came from a lineage of Korean shamans and though he couldn't deny his own power, he was still a skeptical agnostic and talk of things like spirits and magic made him feel weird.

"And recently you asked me about Brynhildur's kids," Böðvar said, looking into his daughter's eyes. "Something's going on with them, isn't it."

Ali rubbed her face. "Where do I even begin."

"Begin at the beginning," Böðvar said.

"OK." Ali nodded. She finished her tea and leaned back in her chair. "So, Dagnýr Sigurðsson is a somewhat famous scientist, and he went missing recently. Like, it's been on the news and stuff. One of my jobs recently was to haul three people from Alice Springs to Sydney. I am about 99% positive one of those people was Sören."

"When you say haul, you mean..."

"I mean it was an assignment that I'm not supposed to tell anybody about, of course now I'm telling you, and... and Kenny knows. I wasn't even allowed to know my passengers' names, or to tell them my real name, and we weren't allowed to interact much. I don't even know if Sören is staying in Sydney or if that's just a temporary stop to wherever he's going. All I know is there was a whole shitload of secrecy and rules surrounding this assignment, my employer clearly thought it was safer for Sören and his companions to be driven to Sydney instead of flown, even though flying would have taken less time. It's a hunch, but this is connected to Dagnýr's disappearance in some way. Like they're trying to keep him from going the same way."

"When you say they... I mean, Borovkov Enterprises is just a business, right?" Böðvar frowned.

"That's what I thought, but my boss's boss is an MI6 agent... and his boss is an MI6 agent. I guess they contract Borovkov Enterprises for some services, like transport, where they don't want to attract a lot of attention."

"Makes sense."

"But now..." Ali gave a nervous laugh. "I didn't know when I was driving him across Australia, that this was my cousin. And of course, he didn't know about me. I only made the connection when I saw Dagnýr on the news and his two baby daughters, who look just like the babies Sören had with him. I know a lot of people say babies all look alike, but no, I'm a mother, I can tell. And I could *feel* how scared Sören was. He was trying to put on a brave face and keep chipper on the trip, but there was just..." Ali's eyes burned with tears. "So much fear. So much *hopelenessness*. The feeling like he'd lost everything. I really wanted to give him a hug, even before I knew who he was, and of course I couldn't because protocol. But now, I know my cousin is out there somewhere and he left his sketchbook in my truck by accident and I want to return it to him, and not just return that, but give him back some of his hope, maybe. That he has family. And the MI6 agents over me won't give me his contact info."

"Well, no, if they don't know that you're related to him, it probably looks really bad," Böðvar said. "Like you got obsessed with him -"

"Yeh, I guess."

"Do you think you should tell them you're his cousin and see if they might give you the info then?" Medika asked.

Ali shrugged. "I don't know if that would make them give it to me, or if it might complicate things even further. Like forcing us into hiding, or... or something. And it sounds really fishy to say 'oh yeh, I think this is my cousin because the babies in his custody look like these other babies I saw on telly and my intuition went off and...' I don't want to disclose that to them until I have Sören's contact information securely in my hand, because at least then if they haul us off somewhere I know where and how I can get to him."

"That's fair," Medika said.

"Jeez," Böðvar said. "Makes you wonder what happened to Dagnýr. Why he disappeared and all that."

Ali nodded. "It does."

"So..." Böðvar cocked his head to one side, and so did Auli, which made Ali snort and Kenny chuckle. Böðvar's affinity for animals and especially his dog was a source of continual amusement when Ali was growing up, and she found it comforting and familiar now. "You're wanting to find your cousin."

Ali nodded. She leaned forward, folded her hands between her knees, and looked down. She felt the gravity of the situation again, like her entire life had been leading up to this point in time, and she needed to choose carefully. "I am possibly about to do something very, very illegal." She looked up at Böðvar, then at Medika.

Medika pursed her lips. "You know your brother Darren just got out of prison," she said. Darren was the second of the children, younger than her by two years. Darren had fallen in with a bad crowd and gotten busted for dealing drugs. "And Tom has another five years..." Tom was the next-to-youngest; he'd stabbed someone.

"Yeh, I know. I... know... you don't want more of your kids going to jail." Ali rubbed her face, feeling a twinge of guilt.

"Darren's trying to get his life together," Böðvar said. "He's gonna come help me run the farm now that I'm getting old and have the arthritis. He's working out some things with his kids' mum, custodial arrangements and such..."

"Yeh, that's good." Ali smiled a little. She hoped she could see Darren some next year.

"So what is it that you're fixing to do that's illegal?" Medika frowned.

"The MI6 agents I've talked to are being uncooperative," Ali said, "and I think I need to go rough one of them up some."

"Which means what, going to England?" Böðvar asked, raising an eyebrow.

Ali nodded. "Flying there on short notice is gonna be expensive, but we have emergency

funds -"

"That's if you don't get stopped right at Heathrow or wherever you're flying in," Kenny spoke up. "You've already gotten on their bad side, they probably have you on a list or something to be brought in the minute you touch down."

"Fuck. Yeh, you're right." Ali hung her head again. "Shit."

"Well..." Medika sighed. "You wouldn't necessarily have to *fly.*"

"What, go by boat?" Ali snorted. "You know how long that would take -"

"No." Medika shook her head. She waved her hand and poured herself more tea, the teapot floating off the tray and pouring by itself into a mug. "Go to Uluru."

"What." Ali's eyes widened. She felt a frisson down her spine, even as she herself didn't know what to make of her mother's family's beliefs.

"There are legends... my grandmother told me that Uluru is a gate to other places, both here on Earth and elsewhere."

"So you want me to go all the way to bloody Uluru based on hearsay. Does anyone you *personally* know have experience with using Uluru as... a gate." Ali both wanted desperately to believe she had a better way of getting to England, and also didn't want to go any further down the path of weirdness than her abilities, and the revelation that she had likely not been bothered by the Norse gods in the way her father's sister was bothered - and probably her cousins - because of protections given through Aboriginal shamanic magic.

"My uncle Nat," Medika said, nodding solemnly.

"The one who's been in and out of the mental hospitals."

"What do you think put him in there?"

"Oh great, that's *totally* a vote of fucking bloody confidence to use Uluru as... as... some kind of portal..." Ali was almost wishing she hadn't come to Ceduna, even though she loved her parents and it was nice to see them again.

"He went through the gate by accident, and he had... help... getting back, I guess you could call it. But a lot of people didn't believe him. You wouldn't be going by accident. You tell the gate you want to go to England and it'll take you. Then wherever you end up, you use the same gate to take you home."

"I... I don't know, Mum. That is crazy fucking shit -"

"You're already about to do crazy fucking shit, Possum," Böðvar said with a wicked grin. "Talking about beating up an MI6 agent to get contact information for your cousin, instead of just saying 'hey I think this person is a relative, can you help me out'..."

"Well, now's your chance to talk me out of it," Ali said. "I came all this way to get a second opinion."

"Alinta, love, I think your mind's already made up," Böðvar said, and Medika nodded.

"You want moral support," Medika said.

"And, it really broke my heart that Sigurð's sister and her husband didn't want me to have nothing to do with my nephews because I married a black lady," Böðvar said. "It would be nice to get to know my late sister's kids, or at least one of them."

"I'm scared shitless," Ali said. "I mean, I've gotten physical with people before... I've done crazy stunts before. But this is the mother of all crazy shit I've ever done and I..." Ali started to cry. "I need strength. I need courage. I'm so afraid, I feel like such a bloody coward..."

"Oh, no, Possum, you're not a coward at all," Böðvar said. "Courage isn't the absence of fear... it's feeling the fear and fighting anyway."

"And courage is having convictions... loyalty to your people, your family... not to leave any behind, not to leave anyone lost." Medika nodded, and reached out to squeeze her daughter's hands.

"I'm gonna think on it some more," Ali said finally.

Ali spent the day helping her father with chores around the farm, and Metallica and Megadeth were given a tour, and attempted to count all the sheep. They also asked Böðvar a lot of questions. "Do they have names? How old are they? Have you ever seen the Big Bad Wolf?"

In the evening, just before sundown, Ali went on a quick bike ride with her father, reflecting on all she'd been told that morning. And then, as they rode into the blazing red sunset, Ali had a moment of realization that sent chills down her spine, despite the heat.

Does anyone you personally *know have experience with using Uluru as... a gate,* Ali had asked her mother.

Ali's eyes widened. *That's why I had to pick up Sören and those two guys at Alice Springs.* That's *how they got here from wherever it is they came from.*

Ali threw her head back and laughed. "Fuck."

"What's so funny, Possum?"

"Life. The universe. And everything."

—

Ali drove Kenny and the kids back to Adelaide on Friday, and then she got right back on the road, a sixteen-hour drive from Adelaide to Uluru that she broke up into two eight-hour shifts, arriving late Sunday afternoon.

Ali was armed with the license plate number of Letitia Fetherstonhaugh, a drone delivered by a drone that Mike walked her through programming over video chat, and a backpack with some essentials, including changes of clothing for the English winter. Her plan was to park when she got to Uluru, make the three-hour trek to the rock, hopefully get everything done within twenty-four hours, and after her business was done in England and she gated back - provided she wouldn't be arrested right then and there - she would

hike three hours back to her car, drive to Alice Springs, and fly to Adelaide from Alice Springs and have her vehicle towed home. Flying within Australia seemed less risky than trying to fly to England, and if she was going to get arrested once she was back in Australia, she'd rather it be at home instead of on the road.

Just the same, she was hoping she wouldn't get arrested.

She was having her doubts about this for more reasons than just getting arrested as she hiked to the rock. She didn't know where the bloody gate was, or how to find it...

Don't see with your eyes. See with your mind. See with your spirit.

Ali wiped sweat from her brow, took a few deep breaths, and closed her eyes. She felt the ground thrumming, and a few steps away it felt like the temperature was a couple of degrees warmer. She walked in that direction and the thrumming intensified. She opened her eyes and saw the rock shimmering up ahead, at first she thought it was heat haze, but as she came closer she saw there was a portion where it looked like there was mist or fog - which couldn't be possible considering how hot and dry it was today... and it was glowing. Ali began to walk faster, and the glow intensified.

When she came within meters of it, it was as if there was a hollowed out space inside the rock, through the mists. Ali's heart began to race, chills down her spine again. She was this close to losing her nerve - *what if I get lost? what if I get in trouble?*- and with a roaring battle cry, she made herself run into the glowing fog, into the hollow. All of a sudden it felt like she had stepped into an elevator-furnace and she was being hurtled down, down, down, like an amusement park ride but far faster, far more nauseating. Ali almost fell over. Her knees shook, her stomach lurched, head spinning. *Focus. Focus.*

"I'm going to England," she began to chant under her breath. "Going to England, going to England, going to England..."

And a few seconds later she was thrown, faceplanting in the snow. The lingering heat of the Australian outback in summer and the heat inside the gate quickly faded as light snow fell around Ali. She had to work fast, pulling on a sweater over her T-shirt and then long trousers over her shorts, then a trenchcoat, knit hat and gloves. Ali's breath steamed the air as she rubbed her gloved hands together. She took a few steps forward and looked back at where she'd just arrived, a chambered barrow of some kind, that looked beautiful in a melancholy way with the snow.

She made her cell phone float into her hand and the GPS informed her she was at Wayland's Smithy. Google Maps informed her she was less than two hours away from London. She was also informed that Uluru was nine hours and thirty minutes ahead of London - it was still Sunday morning here. A grey, snowy morning.

She called an Uber, and braced herself to wait for a bit in the snow, a big temperature shock after the heat of the outback. She'd get some rest at a hotel, and then on Monday...

"Let the games begin," Ali muttered.

Chapter 27

On the morning of Monday, December twentieth, Ali woke up ready for action. Though the holidays were imminent, she also knew that terrorist threats and other dangers happened year-round, and Letitia Fetherstonhaugh was very likely going to work at MI6 today.

There were a few different parking garages within vicinity of the MI6 building, and from a few meters away Ali had the drone fly in and look for a match of Letitia's plates. Nothing came up at first, so Ali decided she would try back a couple of hours later, in case Letitia went into work later. Her heart pounded as she sat in a coffee shop, drinking an espresso, trying to look and act casual, wondering if she was already under surveillance.

When she made her second attempt at looking for Letitia Fetherstonhaugh's car, she got a match. Unfortunately there was an attendant at the parking garage, who operated a fence to let cars in or out - Ali couldn't scale the fence without a problem, which meant Ali was going to have to do one of the things she didn't like doing.

"Hi," Ali said to the attendant in his booth.

"Hi." The attendant scowled. "You can't come in here -"

Ali pushed with her mind. "You're going to let me in."

The attnendant pressed a button and the gate opened. "I'm going to let you in."

"You're just minding your own business. You won't try to follow me inside."

"I'm just minding my own business. I won't try to follow you inside."

Not only did Ali hate doing this for ethical reasons, but it always gave her a slight headache. More than slight today, as hopped up on adrenaline as she was. That said, if she had been able to use the ability long-distance, she would have pushed Letitia over the phone and gotten the information that way rather than going to all this ridiculous trouble; Ali still couldn't quite believe she was doing any of this. But here she was.

Ali dashed inside the parking garage and looked around at the numbers and letters to figure out what level and row Letitia's Bentley was parked in. She had to go up to the second level, and then she had a bit of a walk. She kept looking over her shoulder and trying to feel around her to see if she was being watched or followed.

At last, in row M, there it was, a cobalt blue Bentley 4-door with the exact license plate number Mike had given her. Ali checked her watch. She was going to have a bit of a wait. On the other hand, there was a baby blue microfiber blanket in the back seat, which made Ali's job a little easier.

Ali took a deep breath and then she held out her hand in front of the right-hand back door, and looked inside the car at the controls at the driver's seat; the locks were controlled from there. She gave another push with her mind, pushing pushing *pushing* until she heard the *pop* she was waiting for. She opened the back door, climbed inside, and huddled under the blanket.

Now I wait.

The hours passed, and Ali felt like she was going out of her mind with the combined boredom and adrenaline, but at least Ali was warm. She tried to ignore restless legs, the urge to pee, moving only to check the time and roll her eyes. She hoped this wasn't going to be an incident of Letitia leaving her car at the garage and taking a cab home or going home some other way, like a holiday party at the MI6 office. She also hoped that Letitia hadn't been tipped off that the motor vehicles database and the MI6 personnel database had recently been hacked, that the car was left here as some sort of trap.

Ali waited and waited, her restlessness increasing as well as her anxiety. Cars came and left. Every time the odd person approached, she braced herself, but it was always someone else for another car. Finally she heard steps *thock* in the parking garage, coming closer and closer, and then the steps were *right there.* Ali heard the driver's seat open, and a tall, slim woman with pixie-cut sandy blonde hair in a charcoal grey pantsuit under a black wool trenchcoat got in.

The woman yawned. "Bugger me, I can't wait to get home and have a fucking hot bath."

That was definitely Letitia Fetherstonhaugh's voice. Ali's heart hammered in her ears.

Letitia began to drive, and Ali's heart continued to pound. She made herself hold very, very still, almost holding her breath. Several minutes into the trip Ali's nose began to itch, and Ali could feel a sneeze coming on, which she desperately fought - one sneeze could ruin the entire operation. The urge built and built and Ali fought it back and it finally passed; Ali breathed.

The car began to move faster, like Letitia was on the highway. Ali had driven on highways more times than she could count, she was no stranger to high speed, but she was used to being upright for it, rather than laying down on her side. She could feel everything more sharply, the hurtling forward almost flying, each curve of the road. Ali knew that her senses were being heightened by her anxiety, too - she was shaking now, and hoped that the blanket wasn't quivering along with her.

At last Letitia slowed, and Ali felt the car pulling in. When Letitia came to a full stop, Ali held her breath again, waitingwaiting*waiting*. It had to be exactly the right moment and not a second sooner...

Letitia turned off the ignition, pulled her keys out, and got out of the car. Ali threw off the blanket and opened up the back car door, her hand in her right pocket. Letitia froze at the sound of the back door opening, her hand reaching for her holster just as Ali produced the very illegal taser bolt she owned, and always brought with her on the road. Ali shot the taser bolt at Letitia's back and five seconds of electricity shocked through the Englishwoman. Ali winced as Letitia screamed, falling down on the pavement as her body convulsed.

Ali waved her hand and pulled Letitia's pistol out of its holster, taking it when it floated over to her. Already, Letitia was struggling to break free of the lock on her muscles. Ali knelt on Letitia and floated the keys over to the door. Ali had to try a few different keys before she found the one that worked, opening the front door. Ali got up, took a deep breath, got up off Letitia and picked Letitia up, carrying her inside.

Past the foyer there was an open plan living room and kitchen area, the home very modern and sleek, white walls, black furniture, dark hardwood floors. There was a large panoramic window that gave a view of the Thames riverfront. Ali's eyes searched the room and she saw a glass-topped coffee table in front of a black leather couch, with paperwork scattered on the tabletop. At the bar, there was a laptop computer, with

binders and file folders behind the laptop, some more paperwork beside the laptop, a coffee thermos and an empty shot glass with the remnants of what looked like whisky. The place was otherwise neat and clean and looked barely lived in. Ali looked around for something like a desk chair or a dining chair, something with a back and lower to the floor than the barstools were. When she found what she was looking for - one of two chairs at a small glass-topped dining table - she waved her hand and the chair came over. Normally Ali would be reserved and not use telekinesis in front of a stranger, but she had a feeling Letitia probably knew Anthony was special...

Just before Ali sat Letitia down in the chair, she floated up the contents of her left coat pocket - two lengths of rope. Once Ali had Letitia in the chair, she pinned Letitia's wrists behind her back and used her mind to quickly wrap the rope around Letitia's wrists to tie her to the chair, and the other length to bind Letitia's ankles to the chair.

When she was sure the knots were secure enough - she watched Letitia struggle, not able to get free - Ali wiped sweat from her brow.

"My wallet's in my left coat pocket," Letitia told her, "and there's a hollowed-out book on the shelf under the coffee table with some stacks of emergency cash. Please, just take it and go -"

Ali's eyes widened. She was vaguely offended, wondering if Letitia would have the same reaction if her looks favored her Icelandic father rather than her Aboriginal mother... and then she started laughing with disbelief. "Wow, you really run a shoddy operation if you didn't even check to see what I look like, do you? Or do all black folks look alike to you?"

Letitia blinked; Ali could feel Letitia's sudden shock of recognition at the voice. "Oh shit."

"Yeh, oh shit is right." Ali folded her arms.

"Ms. Jonsson, you have made a terrible, terrible mistake and you are about to enter a world of pain -"

"*You* are not in a position to threaten*me* right now." Ali shook her head. "But I really didn't want to have to resort to this." Ali looked at the kitchen. "Tea?"

Letitia blinked again - Ali could tell Letitia wasn't expecting that sort of courtesy. Ali just walked into the kitchen, quickly found where the tea was located, and started making tea, keeping an eye on Letitia. When the tea was hot and ready, Ali called over to her, "How do you take your tea, ma'am?"

"Two sugars," then under her breath Letitia muttered, "what the fuck."

Ali fixed a mug of tea for each of them, floated Letitia's cup over to her, and worked the cup to and from Letitia's mouth with her mind. Then Ali waved at the other chair at the dining table and it floated over, to land in front of Letitia's chair. Ali floated her own mug of tea into her hands after she sat down.

"Now then," Ali said, "we can do this the hard way or the easy way."

Letitia gave her a filthy look. "We're not doing anything -"

Ali slapped Letitia without touching her. Then Ali had a sip of tea and leaned back, pursing her lips. "Like I *said*, Ms. Fetherstonhaugh. We can do this the hard way or the easy way."

"And what exactly is it that you're here for? Please don't tell me you came*all* this way and went to *so* much trouble just because of that Protocol Delta assignment."

"Well, that is in fact what I'm here for, ma'am. You're going to give me Sören Sigurðsson's phone number and address -"

"Wait. *How do you know that name.* You were under orders not to get names from them, not to give your own."

"I followed those orders to the letter, but I do know that name, yes. And you're going to stop interrupting me." Ali slapped Letitia without touching her again. "Next time I'll tase you again, so do as you're told." Ali cleared her throat. "*As I was saying.* The easy way is this: I walk out of here with Sören Sigurðsson's real, actual phone number and address - not some fake shit, but the real article... and you'll forget this incident ever happened, and I'll go back to my little life in Adelaide and leave you alone, and you'll leave me alone, no police, no making me disappear, none of that."

"And the hard way?"

"If you dig in your heels and you refuse to give me any information... or you give me fake information to get me out of here... or you pretend to agree to my terms and then the police roll up or I've suddenly got other problems... well, I have some insurance." Ali stood up, and with her mind she pulled out another item she'd been keeping in her coat pocket - a 10 terabyte hard drive. She clicked the mouse of Letitia's laptop computer and was relieved to see that it was on, just in sleep mode while not in use. Ali began to poke around different folders and files and it all looked like top-secret MI6 information that could be very bad in the wrong hands. She plugged her 10TB drive into the laptop's USB port and began copying all the files.

"What are you doing?" Letitia asked. "You can't -"

"I can, and I am. All that is going on WikiLeaks if you're not going to play nice with me." With that, Ali sat back down. "I'm sure WikiLeaks would find at least *some* of that very, very, very interesting."

Letitia had a look of genuine *fear* on her face, and even if she had kept her expression perfectly neutral, Ali could *feel* the terror emanating from her. It wasn't "some" of those files that would be of interest to WikiLeaks, it was most if not all of them. Ali poked Letitia's mind just a little deeper and got the mental image of surveillance, videos and photos inspected of people gifted in the way that she was, monitored around the world. A memory of Letitia's bobbed to the surface, Letitia and a thirtysomething handsome dark-haired white bloke in a grey room with a one-way mirror that looked like a police interrogation room but wasn't.

You see, Anthony... I work for a section of MI6 that technically, on the books, does not exist. But we do exist, and the purpose of our existence is to protect people like you... and protect the population from *people like you. Having someone with your set of gifts get captured by an enemy state and put to work for them... well, that could be very bad. And the general populace can't handle the truth that a small segment of humanity can do what you do, and there are some... weird, paranormal things in our world even beyond that. It would create mass civil unrest, the like of which we have never seen before and are not prepared to handle.*

"Are you going to play nice with me, Ms. Fetherstonhaugh, or does WikiLeaks get to know all about the true nature of existence of people like myself and Anthony Hewlett-

Johnson?" Ali raised an eyebrow.

Letitia's mouth opened slightly and a strangled noise came out.

"Yes, I could pry Sören's info out of your head, but that would be rude and I'd just get a migraine headache. I'd rather you tell me." Ali floated over a pen and a blank sheet of paper. "Now, please."

Letitia swallowed hard. "You really mean business."

"I really do indeed mean business, Ms. Fetherstonhaugh. His information, or your department getting a big fucking spotlight on it."

"You understand, then, that Sören is one of the people we're protecting, and giving this information to a random stranger rather goes against those interests. But you're not a random stranger, are you?" Letitia raised an eyebrow. "You're somehow in connection with the disappearance of Dagnýr Sigurðsson, yes?" Letitia frowned. "You're good. Who do you work for? CIA? IRA? Mossad? SVR? Are you a mercenary?"

Oh Jesus. Ali had assumed that either MI6 had done a background check on her and saw her father was Sören's mother's brother and thus Letitia and Anthony already knew the familial relationship and were just being obstinate, *or* they hadn't bothered to do the full checkup and didn't know, and Ali didn't want to tell them just yet in case that meant she would suddenly be relocated or something else of that nature. But now, she could see that from Letitia's point of view, things looked really, really bad. Of *course* there hadn't been a background check with family history beyond maybe who her parents were and what they did for a living, of course a connection hadn't been made, because Ali was black, half-Aboriginal, and Sören was white. And with Icelanders having patronymics instead of surnames, the connection between a Böðvar Jónsson and a Brynhildur Jónsdóttir wouldn't be immediately obvious. Not knowing of the familial connection, it was naturally Letitia's first conclusion to assume Ali worked with whoever was responsible for Dagnýr's disappearance, and that Ali wanted to find Sören for nefarious purposes.

So as much as Ali didn't want to confess, the time was here.

Ali sighed and pinched the bridge of her nose. "I work for myself." She met Letitia's eyes. "Sören Sigurðsson is my cousin, his mother is my father's sister. Up until very recently, I didn't know who he was, and he probably has no idea who I am, may not even know his uncle had kids." She rocked back on her heels and folded her arms. "I'm not looking to do anything bad. I just want to take back the item he lost, in person, let him know he has family in Australia. He could use that information right about now, after the disappearance of his brother and all."

Letitia looked down. She licked her lips - Ali could feel she was still nervous, taking it all in, trying to evaluate whether or not she was being told the truth - and finally Letitia looked back at her, their eyes locking once more.

"I believe you," Letitia said.

"If I'd told you all that over the phone, would you have believed me?"

"Probably not. It's easier to lie over the phone, tells of body language can be lost."

Ali nodded. "Just give me the information I'm after and I'll be on my way, Ms. Fetherstonhaugh."

Letitia took a deep breath. Ali readied the pen and paper. Letitia began to recite a cell phone number, followed by a street address in Sydney.

"Now," Ali said, "to make sure you're not full of shit." Ali poked with her mind to see where Letitia's cell phone was, and then she pulled it from Letitia's coat. She dialed Sören's number into the phone.

It rang three times and a dark, smoky voice answered. "Jæja?"

Ali hit End, satisfied. She wanted Sören's number for reasons, but it would be easier to return the sketchbook in person, rather than taking the risk of being rejected over the phone, shaken and paranoid as Sören was.

Ali called an Uber from her own cell phone - Letitia supplied the pickup address - and got ready to go, collecting the 10TB hard drive from the USB port when all the files were copied. When her cab arrived, beeping outside, Ali said, "Now I mean it. You send the cops after me, your shit goes on WikiLeaks. Leave me alone. Deal?"

"Deal," Letitia said.

Ali still didn't entirely trust her. She returned Letitia's pistol - out of reach just yet, on the coffee table - and then she began to back towards the door. With a flick of her wrist, the ropes untied from Letitia's wrists and ankles, setting her free, but to give herself a head start, as Letitia got up Ali tased her again, in the legs.

"FUCK," Letitia yelped as she toppled over. "SODDING BLOODY KNACKERS SHIT BOLLOCKS FUCKING *HELL*..."

"At least you didn't step on a Lego," Ali snarked as she walked out, shutting the door behind her. Then she made a run for the cab parked in the driveway, quickly ducking into the passenger seat. "Hi," she said, as casual as could please.

Chapter 28

Some time after Letitia was tased in the legs, she made it to the couch. She took some slow, deep breaths, trying to take it all in.

She had definitely been in error, not running a full background check on Jonsson, and that was her responsibility - Anthony had his hands full right now.

But now she had a potential situation on her hands. She didn't want all of those files on WikiLeaks, so she wouldn't call the police... but she didn't want Jonsson ever handling another Protocol Delta assignment. It was statistically unlikely that Jonsson would ever be transporting a long-lost family member again, but Letitia still didn't trust her to keep things professional. Letitia was listed on the books as an Borovkov Enterprises employee, but she didn't actually have the authority to fire Jonsson, who worked in a different department.

However, she knew who did.

She dialed Ingmar Borovkov's cell number. After three rings he answered.

"Letitia, hello," came that smooth, deep voice with its not-Russian accent.

"Hi, Ingmar."

"What's going on?" Ingmar was never one for pleasantries, he wanted to get right down to business, something Letitia appreciated.

Letitia took a deep breath. "I had a bit of an interesting time this evening."

"Oh, did you."

"Mmm. To make a long story short, one of your company's drivers, an Alinta Jonsson, was recently given a Protocol Delta assignment. You know the type - minimal information given to the driver about what they're shipping. In this case, she was transporting people who needed to be relocated." Even though the people were known to Ingmar, indeed Ingmar had entrusted Letitia with their care back in 2019, it would be breaking the protocol to even tell *him* who they were - and that hardly looked good when she was trying to get a driver sacked for breaking protocol. "One of the people left an item in her truck and she went to rather extreme lengths to make sure they get it back."

"Extreme lengths how."

"Well, she was told that one of our agents would personally return it to the party if she brought it in. She refused, said she wanted to do it herself, that it was conscience - only she could entrust its safe delivery. She wanted contact info, and of course we couldn't give it to her for the mutual safety of everyone involved."

"Of course."

"She came here all the way from Australia, she somehow got into my car - she somehow found out which car was *mine*, which strongly suggests she got a hold of my plates from somebody somewhere. She hid in the back without me knowing, rode all the way to my house, when I got out she tased me, tied me up, dragged me inside, took out a hard

drive, started copying everything on my laptop, and threatened to dump all my laptop files on WikiLeaks if I didn't give her the information she wanted."

"Did you give it to her?"

"...Yes, after she established she truly meant the party no harm and she really did want to return a lost item herself. Now, I expect to come under fire for that decision, but she wasn't lying as far as I can tell, and I'd rather risk the one party, or three as it were, than have my entire department and all of its cases compromised. She told me not to call the police on her or she'd put everything on WikiLeaks, so I have not. But there needs to be some sort of consequence for her actions. She shouldn't be driving anything for your company anymore."

There was a pause; Letitia could tell Ingmar was taking it all in. "I agree, she shouldn't be a truck driver for Borovkov Enterprises anymore."

Letitia smiled and breathed a small sigh of relief. "Good. The contact person to fire her is Anthony Hewlett-Johnson -"

"Oh, I'm not going to fire her." Another pause. "That was an impressive amount of dedication and fortitude. I'd like her to be my personal assistant."

Letitia's face fell. She couldn't believe what she'd just heard. "You. What."

"Yes. While I'm based in Sydney and trying to keep a low profile, I could use some help managing various tasks. I wouldn't trust just anyone to do it, but someone who is that scrupulous about returning something that doesn't belong to them and is willing to go to extreme lengths... that's promising. Please notify Alinta Jonsson I will be taking her on as my PA at once, she starts as soon as possible."

Letitia was fuming now. She'd experienced no small amount of tribulation and annoyance during her time with MI6, and it seemed to get ramped up since summer 2019 since Ingmar put the three immortals in her care; the situation with having to emergency relocate Sören Sigurðsson and his partners had been a clusterfuck nightmare. Today had been a disaster - and one she could have prevented if she had been more careful, like checking the back seat of her car - but this was adding insult to injury.

"Well then." Letitia sniffed. "I shall inform you of this first - I will be taking an unspecified leave of absence from my duties. Your new contact person within MI6 will be Anthony Hewlett-Johnson. He was recruited into MI6 in 2015. He came from the Special Boat Service, where he's served in the Gulf War. He's... gifted..."

"Yes, I am aware of who he is."

Letitia wondered about that - Ingmar was never just *aware* of people unless there was a reason - but she let it go. It was no longer her problem or concern.

"It's been a pleasure working with you, Letitia."

"I wish I could say the same," Letitia said, and hung up. "Arsehole."

–

"What is it now."

Letitia smirked. That was one thing she would miss about Anthony Hewlett-Johnson - if he saw her number that was always how he greeted her. Not "hi", "hello", "good morning / afternoon", "what can I do for you", but a crisply annoyed "*what is it now*".

"Well, Anthony, I have some news for you -"

"*Oh god.*"

Letitia's smirk became a chuckle. "But first I have a story." She sobered.

"A *story*. Go on, then."

"That girl Alinta Jonsson who kept calling you to try to get to me..."

"Ah yes, her. She finally got in touch with you, I take it?"

"She got a little more than in touch. She came all the way to Britain from Australia -"

"Oh dear."

"Somehow managed to figure out which car in the parking garage was mine, got in the back seat -"

"You don't always check your car before you drive off? I do."

Letitia liked Anthony, but she didn't need his smug bullshit right now. She went on. "She rode in the back seat on the way home, then once I got there she *tasered me*, dragged me in and tied me up."

"...Kinky."

"Fuck you."

"Not my type."

"*No shit.*" Anthony was gay - out, but not really flaunting it. If he wasn't gay, Letitia would have been tempted to make their relationship a bit more unprofessional, much as that was frowned upon. Times like this, though, she wanted to smack him more than anything else.

"How did she even manage to get within range to assault you?"

"She's like you." Letitia closed her eyes, remembering the way the ropes had wound about her without the girl even touching them.

"I see. So... what happened after she went Christian Grey on your arse?"

"Anthony, I repeat, *fuck you*." God, she was going to miss him. "She had a hard drive, started copying everything on my laptop, and told me she was going to dump everything on WikiLeaks if I didn't give her certain information."

"And this is why you always turn your computer off when you're not using it, always log out of admin -"

"Anthony, I don't need a lecture from you. Up until now leaving everything on and logged in was never a problem."

"Up until now. That's the difference between you and myself - my training and experience has taught me it's better to err on the side of caution and not take any chances."

I swear to god, Anthony. He was such a smug *bastard*.

Anthony went on, "Anyway, I take it nothing is on WikiLeaks or I would have heard about it from someone other than you."

"Correct."

"What did she even want."

"Exactly what she kept going on about - the contact info of the three snowflakes she transported to Sydney. That wasn't a ruse, it was the real deal. All of that for an address and telephone number."

There was a pause. "Are you fucking *serious*."

"Deadly."

Anthony gave a low whistle. "That's an impressive amount of dedication. Or insanity. You gave her the information?"

"I did, which is part of why I'm calling you. She did tell me that she's one of the snowflakes' relations. I did a background check after the fact and it checks out, cousin on the mother's side. Mutually unknown prior to now because the family history is... problematic. But as much as she's clearly a bit unhinged, don't hunt her unless she causes a situation."

"Got it."

"It was concern enough that I told our esteemed employer - well, within the bounds of what info he had, since not even he would know specifics on a Protocol Delta job. And besides, I could barely string two words together when I called him. I've only *just now* calmed down. But he shares your opinion that she went to impressive lengths to return a lost item. So much so that he's decided she's to be his new personal assistant."

Anthony's laughter rang out. "Oh. Oh shit."

"That was rather adding insult to injury, after what I'd been through -"

"Oh, I'm sure. You poor *dear.*"

"Anthony, you mock me now, but you'd be a bit miffed if you were in the same situation."

"I wouldn't be." A pause. "She'd be dead. Which is a shame, because she sounds like she's got heart, real strength of conviction and character. She'd be dead just the same."

Letitia shuddered. Once, years ago, she and Anthony had been at a cafe having lunch and as they were walking out she'd watched as those green eyes latched onto a bloke like a predator spotting its prey. Anthony unceremoniously waved his hand and she watched as the man had a fatal heart attack there on the sidewalk, and the contents of the man's

briefcase showed that he was planning on setting off a bomb - Anthony had sensed the disturbance and acted in just the right amount of time. It had been one thing to read Anthony's service record in the SBS and another thing to personally witness what he was capable of, and it made Letitia mighty glad that Anthony Hewlett-Johnson was on their side. She had never forgotten that Anthony had a body count - he did what he had to do when duty called. Yes, Alinta Jonsson would have gotten nowhere near him. The minute she'd come out to play, he would have choked her to death without touching her, then made the body disappear.

"There's more," Letitia said. "The promotion she received within the company was... rather the final straw. When you were brought into MI6 as my righthand man, or left in your case, you knew the time would come where you might someday have to take over for me. And I've seen you salivate after my job for some time now. So I'm going on an extended leave of absence. I don't know when or if I'll be back, but you've got my job. Which, for the record, is not just being the contact person for Ingmar Borovkov within the agency, who is currently located in Sydney, but also now includes you having a more up close and personal role with the snowflakes in Sydney, since after what happened in Iceland we need to make sure that they're behaving themselves. Those lot are so trying that I've got to wonder if they're related to Ingmar Borovkov himself."

"I welcome a change of routine."

"You do now. We'll see how you feel in six months. Anyway, you're staying in Sydney until further notice, this is your new permanent assignment, and please stand by for further instructions."

"It was a pleasure serving with you."

"Likewise. You try to stay out of trouble now."

"What's the fun in that?"

_

It was Tuesday, December twenty-second. Sören had been in Sydney just shy of two weeks.

Now that the adrenaline of the cross-country trips across Canada and Australia had worn off, the depression was settling back in. Sören was making himself get out of bed every day and forcing himself to do something other than lay around and zone out, for the sake of the girls. He not only tended to their needs with feeding, changing, and bathing them, but he gave them cuddles, played with them, read and sang to them, and took them for walks and on little trips around Sydney. For better or worse, Sydney was home now, and he was in a beautiful part of the world - Sydney had rightly earned its nickname the Emerald City, a gem in the Southern Hemisphere.

But Sören still felt lost. He had yet to hear from any of his family, Dag was still missing, and not being able to show his drawing or painting to the public was really getting to him.

Dooku and Maglor went grocery shopping while Sören gave the girls a bath, somewhat cheered by them playing with their rubber duckie, making it squeak. When the girls were dried off and freshly dressed, Sören put them down for a nap, and then he sat out in the backyard for a bit to play fetch with Huan, looking out at Sydney Harbour.

Dooku and Maglor didn't just come back with groceries, but Christmas decorations. A little tree, ornaments, stockings to hang on the fireplace mantle. Sören raised an eyebrow at it.

"As you know, it is the twenty-second, Christmas is very soon," Dooku said.

"Jæja, I got that. I just..." Sören shrugged. "Not really feeling it this year."

Dooku sighed and gave him a disappointed look. "It's the babies' first Christmas."

"Which they'll be too young to remember, most likely."

"Perhaps so. But we really should..." Dooku sighed again and pinched the bridge of his nose. "You used to love Christmas. You were always so enthusiastic about celebrating it, back in Iceland."

"That was before what happened, happened." Sören looked down. "Christmas won't bring my brother back."

"No. Nobody is saying that. But the little family that we have, right here... it's a way of further cementing that we're here, together. We have each other. That does not stop being important just because your brother is gone -"

Sören started crying, not able to help it. After a minute Dooku went over to him and gave him a tight hug. He pet Sören's curls and rocked him.

"I'm sorry," Sören said.

"Your feelings are perfectly understandable, sweetheart. But we've all been through a lot, and..." Dooku cupped Sören's chin and tilted his face up, making Sören look at him. Sören saw the unshed tears in Dooku's own eyes. "We need... we deserve... to do something nice for ourselves. We need to at least try."

"Jæja, I guess so."

"You know what we got at the store?" Maglor cut in. He waved a bag of licorice pieces. "There's stuff for you to make those Icelandic Christmas cookies that you do so well." Maglor smiled fondly, and Sören knew he was thinking about their first Christmas together back in 2009, and the subsequent Christmases, when he thought Maglor was "Alejandro" and they lived together in Reykjavik.

"I myself could go for some *piparkökur, spesíur* and *lakkrístoppar*," Dooku said, nodding.

Baking would be a welcome distraction from the usual train of sad, morbid thoughts. Sören nodded. "OK. If it would make you happy..."

"Well, we want you to be happy too." Maglor folded his arms. "But this is a step in that direction."

Sören got up and Dooku floated over a bag with the ingredients to make cookies; Sören caught it. "I guess I'll get to work."

_

Ali was jetlagged, exhausted from the adrenaline crash, and as soon as she got home from her flight from Alice Springs to Adelaide, she had to handle last-minute packing, since she and Kenny and the kids would be getting on a plane tomorrow to Los Angeles to see Kenny's family in Anaheim, California for Christmas. They would also visit Disneyland while they were out there, as they did every year.

Right now on Tuesday afternoon she was half-asleep, curled up against Kenny who was reading a Stephen King novel. Ali's phone went off, jolting her awake.

"The fuck," Ali said.

She floated the phone over to her and her eyes widened when she saw it was the number of Anthony Hewlett-Johnson. She took a deep breath as she swiped to accept - Letitia had upheld her end of the deal to not involve the police, as far as Ali could tell, but Ali hadn't had the foresight to ask not to be sacked from her job. Anthony Hewlett-Johnson may have worked for MI6, but he was also Murdock's boss. Ali braced herself.

"Hello," Ali said.

"Hello, Ms. Jonsson, this is Anthony Hewlett-Johnson -"

"I know."

A soft chuckle. "I have some news for you."

"I'm fired, aren't I?"

"Actually, no. But you will no longer be a driver for Borovkov Enterprises. We have another job for you."

"Another... job."

There was a dramatic pause and Anthony went on, "Ingmar Borovkov himself was impressed by the length you went to in order to follow your conscience with returning the lost item. He is based in Sydney, and he would like you to be his new personal assistant. The new job is a *significant* pay upgrade from what you are making now."

Ali couldn't believe it. "Ingmar. Borovkov. *The* Ingmar Borovkov. The multi-billionaire."

"The one and only, yes."

"He... wants... me... to..."

"Do I have to repeat myself."

Twat. "So, wait, he's in Sydney. I'm in Adelaide."

"Correct. You will need to relocate to Sydney for this job. We will do it for you, all expenses paid. We even have a house all ready for you to move into. We'll help you with transferring schools for your children."

This was convenient - it would make it easier for Ali to go visit Sören and return the sketchbook, which she was planning on doing after the holidays, once she'd gotten back from the States and had some time to decompress. "Well, brilliant. What's my actual job

description? What does this line of work entail?"

"Whatever Mr. Borovkov tells you to do... within reason, of course, but he would not make inappropriate demands of you. I assume, though, that because he is known to keep such a low profile, he may want help with things like shopping, or you being the go-to person for various interests and investments of his. He can tell you more about it himself. He'll have you sign all the contracts in-person when you arrive in Sydney."

"All right."

"One thing, though. Because Mr. Borovkov keeps such a low profile, this job*is* semi-classified. If you must tell someone outside of your partner who you are working for, apart from people whom you are dealing with on Mr. Borovkov's behalf, please use the alias Joe Friday."

"Joe Friday." *That sounds like an obviously fake name.* But Ali didn't say it aloud.

She didn't need to. Anthony gave a soft chuckle, as if he also knew the name sounded fake. "Yes, Joe Friday."

"All right, well, when do I start?"

"Immediately."

"Er." Ali glanced at Kenny, who raised an eyebrow, and then she rubbed her dreadlocks, feeling the adrenaline kick back up. "Well, I can't do that. I have non-refundable tickets to go to the States tomorrow to see my partner's family -"

"Yes, you're going to have to cancel that flight. We will reimburse you above and beyond whatever you paid for tickets, plus a starting bonus to make it worth your while -"

"That's only one part of it. My entire*house.* I can't just pack up everything and leave on a moment's notice -"

"We're sending movers out to help you."

"When?"

And then Ali heard a helicopter right outside, impossibly loud. She looked out the window and saw burly men in khaki uniforms getting out in her backyard. Then there was the sound of a truck pulling up in front of her house; Ali got up, peeked out the front window and saw a very large moving truck.

"Right now," Anthony said.

Chapter 29

On Wednesday the twenty-third, Maglor went out for the afternoon to begin to look at properties for potentially opening up a space where he could give music lessons again - something he'd enjoyed doing in Akureyri, and had missed. This gave Sören and Dooku some alone time after they put the girls down for a nap.

For the last couple of days Sören had the nagging feeling that he'd forgotten something important - besides leaving his sketchbook on Nina's truck, and besides not asking Anthony for the vial of ashes and jar of dirt from the mantle at the house in Akureyri. Cuddling with Dooku, it finally hit him.

"Oh my god." Sören pulled back with a gasp. "Nico, it was your birthday on Monday and I totally forgot. I'm so sorry." His eyes burned with tears, feeling the stab of guilt. "Oh god..."

"Oh, sweetheart. I could have mentioned it, but I didn't. In fairness, Macalaurë didn't remember either - he apologized to me this morning." Dooku gave a wry chuckle. "As you know, I'm not getting any older anymore, so -"

"It still matters to me. I mean, you guys did my birthday before... before..." Sören tried to hold the tears back, but they broke. "Before shit hit the fan." He started sobbing. "God, all I do is fucking cry."

Dooku put his hand on Sören's heart and gently kissed his brow. "You're sensitive, is all. You feel things deeply."

Sören nodded, jaw trembling with his tears. "It's... not... fair... that we didn't celebrate... your birthday." He sobbed on Dooku's shoulder, feeling horrible about it. "I know everything's been crazy with us getting settled in and catching our breath, but *still*."

"I told you it's all right. I'm not offended."

"It's not all right, Nico."

Dooku's brow furrowed. "No Hi Not Offended? My goodness, you're being hard on yourself."

Sören gave him a look. Dooku laughed, and then he pulled Sören close and began to kiss his tears. "Darling. It's. All. Right."

"I am doing goddamn *something* for your birthday, Nico." With that, Sören got up. "I'm baking you a fucking cake."

Baking Christmas cookies the day before had put Sören in a baking mood - especially when he had people who appreciated his cooking, rather than that vile Justin Roberts insulting everything he did regardless of whether or not it was actually bad. Sören went to the kitchen and rummaged through the baking supplies, and assembled the ingredients to make a Black Forest gâteau - a chocolate cream cake with cherry filling, which he'd learned was Dooku's favorite. Dooku kept him company in the kitchen as he worked, and when the cake baked in the oven, Sören led Dooku to the jacuzzi, where they cuddled, drank champagne and looked out at Sydney Harbour.

After awhile snuggling together turned into kissing and petting, which quickly got heated, hands wandering in the tub, sensually caressing, teasing. When Dooku began to kiss and lick Sören's neck and shoulder, Sören reached for Dooku's hard cock under the water,

stroking it slowly. Then Dooku's hand gripped Sören's cock as their mouths met again, tongues swirling together, both of them moaning into the kiss. Sören came closer and their cocks kissed too, cock rubbing cock, Dooku's hand now around both of them, Sören's hand on Dooku's, Sören's other hand rubbing Dooku's chest hair and beard, enjoying the feel of the silver fur on his fingertips and palm. Sören was tempted to say to hell with the cake and drag Dooku off to bed, but he really did want to make up for missing Dooku's birthday, and the more they got worked up the better their eventual release would be.

When the timer went off, Sören strutted to the kitchen with a towel around his waist, hard cock tenting the towel. He let the cake cool, pouring them more champagne - Dooku waited on the couch, naked, propped up on one elbow. Sören leered at him and Dooku turned beetroot, which Sören found endearing. It also made his lust burn even hotter, to the point where Sören's hands were shaking as he attempted to put buttercream frosting and a maraschino cherry layer on top of the cake. He got a little bit of cherry sauce on himself and that was when Sören had an idea, which echoed back to their first year together, when Sören had first celebrated Dooku's birthday.

"Hey, Nico, let's have cake outside."

Dooku raised an eyebrow. "Like this?"

Sören nodded. There was enough space between them and their neighbors - including a thick grove of trees on either side - that they wouldn't be seen out there naked, especially not if they were in the garden-and-poolside area, which had a wall. And it was a warm summer day.

Sören cut two generous pieces of cake and carried them outside; Dooku followed, carrying glasses of champagne. Dooku used the Force to spread a blanket out on the grass, and he and Sören sat down. But before Dooku could take his plate of cake, Sören mashed it on himself and lay back, spreading the cake over his chest and stomach. "Come and get it."

Dooku gave a little growl, which made Sören's cock twinge. Dooku leaned over and began to eat the cake off of Sören's naked body, kissing him every few bites, sharing it with him. Sören's cock and hole twitched and throbbed as Dooku's mouth worked over his body - he had deliberately put the cake on some of his most erogenous areas. Sören almost came right then as Dooku ate cherries off of his nipples, lapping and suckling them well after they were cleaned off. His arousal intensified as he remembered that first year together, the way they ate cake off each other's naked bodies in bed. This was somehow even hotter, when they had learned each other's bodies so well since 2017, and something so shamelessly wanton about making love outside like this, even if they weren't going to be seen by others. This brought out the animal side of them, which had been dormant for too long, and was coming out with a vengeance now. Dooku's teeth were nibbling on Sören's stomach, and Sören clutched his head, moaning.

When Sören's body was clean of cake, Dooku said, "You should enjoy a piece too, my dear."

"Yes, I should." With that, Sören shoved Dooku on his back and mashed cake into his chest and stomach. He collected some of the cherry-and-buttercream topping on his fingers, and anointed the head of Dooku's cock. Then Sören ate his way down, lapping it off Dooku's body, paying special attention to his nipples, loving the way Dooku trembled and moaned beneath Sören's lips and tongue. Sören continued to lick at the freshly clean skin, teasing. When at last he got to Dooku's cock he licked the mess off slowly, Sören's own cock throbbing almost painfully, his balls tightening with need. Dooku was leaking a

lot of precum now and the taste of it combined with the cherries and frosting made it even more delicious. After Dooku's cock was licked clean of the topping Sören sucked it slowly, stroking himself to the sound of Dooku's deep moans and sighs. At last Dooku pulled Sören's head off his cock and pulled him into a fierce, passionate kiss.

There was a bit of topping left on the plates. Sören collected some on his fingers and Dooku licked and sucked Sören's fingers, heat in his eyes. Then Dooku fed Sören from his fingers, with Sören's mouth moving back and forth on them like it was a cock. They continued to feed each other the last bits of frosting, licking and sucking each other's fingers and palms until the plates were clean, and then they fell on each other again, kissing hungrily.

They were both leaking so much precum that they didn't need lube. Dooku lay on his back again and pulled Sören on top of him. Sören knew what Dooku wanted - his favorite position. Sören straddled Dooku's hips and bit his lower lip as Dooku guided the head of his cock to Sören's opening; Sören gasped as Dooku began to push inside. Sören was a bit tighter than usual since they hadn't had much sex over the last month, with the craziness of everything, and Dooku groaned as he felt Sören wrapping around him. At last he bottomed out and they sighed together, taking each other's hands, feeling the love between them, that sweetness of being joined, one flesh.

Sören began to ride slowly, moaning as Dooku's hands slid over him. Dooku's cock always felt so right inside him, long and thick and with a slight upcurve that glided over that sweet spot inside him perfectly; Sören loved the veiny texture, the feeling of Dooku's cock pulsing within his walls. He loved looking at Dooku, trim, nice muscle definition rippling with each motion, the contrast of olive skin and silver fur on his chest and arms and legs, the predatory look in those dark eyes as he took what was his again and again. He savored that feeling of being claimed, possessed, one with the man he loved so deeply, both from ancient times and having fallen in love with him all over again in this life - his father figure, his protector, who took care of him. Now he wanted to take care of Dooku, to show him how much he appreciated him, not wanting him to feel taken for granted for an instant.

It has always been you, Fëanáro, Dooku spoke across their bond.

*My Ñolofinwë, the other half of my soul.*Sören leaned down, took Dooku's face in his hands, and kissed him. Then he rose up, Dooku's hand on his heart, before it slid over to "innocently" brush a nipple; Sören moaned.

Sören's moans got louder when Dooku began to play with his nipples, rubbing, pinching, pulling on the nipple rings. And Sören rode faster when Dooku leaned up to draw a nipple into his mouth, Sören's arms around him. Soon Sören was bucking madly, his cries answered by the slap of Dooku's balls as Dooku matched his rhythm, thrusting up into him harder and harder, Sören's whimpers answered by Dooku's deep groans. Dooku continued to lap and suckle Sören's nipples, making them exquisitely sensitive, which went straight to his cock, twinging, dripping precum. When Dooku reached to stroke Sören's cock in time with his thrusts, his free hand playing with the nipple where his mouth had just left, Sören felt himself right on that edge, desperate for release, yet never wanting to stop, it felt too good...

Their eyes met. Sören could feel Dooku on that edge too - he could see Dooku trembling. Sören leaned in for one more kiss, and when their tongues began to play together Sören gave in to his climax, screaming into the kiss as he throbbed deliciously. A few seconds later Dooku gave a deep moan into the kiss, shuddering as his molten flow filled Sören. Sören sighed - he loved that feeling. They kissed again, petting each other, and Dooku lay back, pulling Sören into his chest, arms tight around him, rocking him as Sören

listened to his heartbeat.

"I love you, you know," Sören said after they lay there a few minutes.

"I know." Dooku kissed the top of Sören's head and pet his curls. "I love you too, sweetheart."

"I'm sorry, again, that I forgot -"

Dooku grabbed Sören and silenced him with a kiss; Sören's cock stirred awake again. "Please stop apologizing."

"I don't want you to feel like I don't care," Sören said. His chest tightened, his eyes welling up again. "I don't ever want you to doubt how important you are to me... how I feel about you." Sören stroked Dooku's face, skritched his beard like a cat. "I would die for you, Nico. And in a way I did, back in the day when... when I thought you hated me, that you didn't love me anymore..." The tears began to flow again, Sören's jaw trembling as he remembered. "I went off to Angband..."

Dooku closed his eyes, and now he began to cry too, silent tears spilling down his cheeks. Sören could feel the grief across their bond - the grief that ultimately caused Fingolfin to face down Morgoth in single combat, nothing left to lose.

Dooku opened his eyes and he gave Sören a stern look, though his eyes were sad rather than angry - compassionate, even. He stroked Sören's cheek and took Sören's hand and kissed it. "I know you would die for me, Sören. Fëanáro. But now... I want you to live for me." He stroked Sören's cheek again, then his beard, thumb tracing the full, soft lips. "The last few months, you haven't been living. You've been surviving. When we first met each other in 2017, I was lonely and depressed. Even more serious than I am now. Working as a criminal defense barrister for decades... it chews you up and spits you out, and I felt like more and more of the life had been sucked out of me. But you made me laugh. You made me have fun, despite myself. You had so little in your life compared to the privilege that I took for granted, and yet you had so *much*, making the most of what you had, showing me the little wonders all around. I don't expect you to be happy all the time. I know you've struggled with depression since you were a child. But I miss seeing that fire in you. That life in you. I know it's still there. And I will do whatever I can - whatever you need me to - to help you back. It hurts to see you lost in the darkness, Fëanáro. Please. No more dying to prove how much we love each other. Let's build a life worth living. Not just for the sake of your daughters... but because you deserve better. We deserve this second chance we've been given to get things right."

Sören wept, and Dooku cried with him. They clung to each other, rocking, Sören sobbing loudly and Dooku crying more quietly but no less fervently. And at last Sören nodded, overcome by those words, the feeling behind them - Dooku had been a magnificent courtroom manipulator in London, and Fingolfin had been an inspiring leader, always knowing just what to say and how to say it.

"I love you," Dooku husked. "So very, very much -"

Sören kissed him hard. One kiss became another, and another. Dooku's cock came back to life, and as they kissed their hard cocks rubbed together, silken steel teasing. Sören's hands ran over Dooku's body, wanting him again, craving not just another orgasm but another *fuck*, wanting to be taken, filled, their bodies expressing what words could not.

Sören got on all fours, wiggling his ass at Dooku, who laughed softly before he slapped Sören's ass. "So wanton," Dooku said. "So shameless."

"Jæja, get over here and fuck me."

Dooku knelt behind Sören, grabbed Sören's hips, and pushed into him. Their hips and balls slapped together as Dooku took him fast and hard, his deep groans and grunts accompanied by Sören's whimpers and howls. Sören rocked his hips back at Dooku, fucking himself on that luscious cock driving into him, and after awhile Dooku leaned over him and began to kiss Sören's neck, nape, and shoulder, knowing how sensitive he was there. When he tilted Sören's face to kiss him, Sören almost came, but held back, wanting to keep feeling that cock rubbing inside him, that feeling of complete surrender to lust, to passion...

"Well, what do we have here?" Maglor was outside now, cock in hand, stroking himself.

Before Sören could answer, Maglor shoved his cock in Sören's mouth. Sören loved it, trembling as he greedily sucked it down with a little whimper, rocking against Dooku even harder. Maglor grabbed Sören's head, pulling his curls, and gently fucked Sören's mouth, Sören rubbing his tongue with his mouth full, getting closer and closer to that edge as he gave in even deeper to his lust, watching his beautiful Maglor moan and sigh and growl as his cock was pleasured. Sören loved feeling slutty like this, hungry for their cocks, completely debauched. Dooku began to nibble and bite Sören's neck and shoulder, making Sören feel even more animal, in heat for them both.

Maglor came first, too overcome by his arousal watching them fuck, and when Sören's mouth was flooded it set him off too; Sören turned his head to kiss Dooku with his mouth full of Maglor's seed and Dooku cried out into the kiss, shaking as he spent into Sören.

Maglor rolled onto the blanket with them, laughing. "Wow," he said.

Dooku laughed too. "If this is how you make up for missing my birthday, I'll see to it that you shan't ever remember my birthday on the right day again."

Sören giggled and snuggled between the two of them, content under the cool shade of the trees, the scent of roses wafting over from the garden.

_

The next day was Christmas Eve. Sören, Dooku and Maglor went out with the girls to pick up the makings for Christmas dinner, and on the way inside Sören snorted, once again amused by how Dooku and Maglor had wrapped fairy lights around the palm trees outside their house. It still didn't feel quite like Christmas because it was summer here, but the absurdity of it tickled Sören.

Dooku and Maglor set to work making dinner - not Christmas dinner but something fancy nonetheless - and when it was in the oven, Dooku and Maglor went outside with Huan, and Sören sat with the girls and the cats in the living room. Kate and Tori were getting fussy again. They had been to see a doctor approved by MI6's protection program, who informed Sören the girls were teething. Even though Sören knew this was why they were so cranky - that and they probably somehow knew Dag was missing - it still made him feel helpless when he tried various methods to soothe them and calm them down and they continued to squall.

The babies were still squalling when the doorbell rang. Reluctantly, Sören got up to answer the door, and saw Anthony Hewlett-Johnson standing there, looking flawlessly

elegant in a navy blue blazer, light blue shirt and faded jeans with expensive brogues and his Rolex. He smelled of coconut like he was wearing sunblock, which mixed in an intoxicating way with the musk of his cologne.

Sören stood there dry-mouthed for a few seconds, heat flooding his cheeks, before he pushed himself to action, feeling annoyed with himself for acting like an overgrown schoolboy with a stupid crush. "Hi."

"Hello." Anthony cringed as Kate hollered. "Is now a bad time?"

Sören ran a nervous hand through his curls. "Jæja, it's always a bad time, but, ah, come in. Coffee? Tea?"

"This won't take long," Anthony said, but he came in anyway, and cautiously sat in the armchair, cringing again as Tori gave a screaming cry.

"They're teething," Sören said apologetically.

"Awww." Anthony looked genuinely sympathetic.

"No kids of your own, I take it."

Anthony snorted. "That would be a hard no."

Sören leaned in to begin massaging Kate's gums. "So you're here to... check in, I guess?"

"Yes, and to give you an update."

"Oh?"

Anthony nodded. "Letitia is taking a leave of absence. I have been assigned to you for the foreseeable future, so I'm staying here in Sydney."

"*Oh.*" Sören wondered what had made Letitia take off, but he didn't press it. "I see."

"I told you this already, but the powers that be in our department have decided you need closer supervision after you exposed yourself and Dag exposed himself, so you'll be seeing a lot of me. I'll be coming by at least once a week, probably more than that. They won't be long visits necessarily, just touching base with you to see what you've been up to, and if you need anything."

"OK."

"I'll try not to be up your arse too much." Anthony gave a wry smile.

You can be up my arse anytime. Sören shoved that thought away, cheeks burning. He did not want to be attracted to this guy. "We'll try to not be too much of a pain in your arse."

"Well." Anthony raised an eyebrow. "Letitia warned me about you guys. But I have confidence that after what happened in November, you know you *have* to be more careful now. Not just for your own sake, but now for your children as well."

Sören sighed. His heart sank, thinking of Dag again. "We keep calling them my children instead of Dag's children. I mean, I know they have to be on paper as mine for our collective best interests, but..." Sören frowned. "Sounds so final. Like... like this is permanent." He hung his head. "Still haven't found Dag yet, huh?"

"No, and I'll be honest with you, the more time that goes on, the colder that trail gets. MI6

hasn't stopped looking for him, but it's the proverbial needle in a haystack. He could be anywhere, and we just don't know. I'm sorry."

Sören nodded. "Já, so am I."

Anthony gave a sharp exhale. "Sören, I met Dag once."

Sören looked up, and over at him. Their eyes met. "Really? When? How?"

"In 2001, I was newly in the Royal Navy... it was about two months before I was deployed to the Gulf after 9/11. There was a teenage boy who was lost in London, needed directions. I helped him get where he was going, and he said his name was Dag and he was attending Oxford to become a physicist, which stood out with me because of how young he was, and he mentioned being from Iceland, which you don't see everyday. He asked for my contact info to send me a care package, and he did, and I always felt guilty that I didn't write back to him to say thank you, but I was in the middle of a war, and." Anthony's voice trailed off, and for a moment he looked troubled, haunted; Sören could sense him remembering the Gulf War. The loss of innocence in his youth. Then Anthony's cold, professional side came back, catching himself. "Anyway, I thought you should know. Your brother seemed like a genuinely good person - someone I might have liked to be friends with if things were different - and I'm sorry that he's gone missing. I will not make you false promises as to his return. I can only tell you that we will do what we can."

For some reason, the little anecdote of Anthony having met Dag in London in 2001 - Dag would have been all of sixteen years old back then - went straight to Sören's heart. With Christmas quickly approaching - Sören would have gone to Toronto to see Dag this Christmas if things hadn't happened as they did - Sören felt the loss even more sharply. He missed his entire family, wondering why they hadn't been in touch yet if they were notified. He tried not to cry, not wanting to cry in front of Anthony. Then Kate and Tori started up again and the tears came silently. "Fuck," Sören said under his breath.

"I didn't mean to upset you." Anthony gave him another sympathetic look. Then he started to get up. "I... I should go now."

"Wait," Sören said before Anthony could head to the door.

Anthony paused.

"You said that my sister would be notified about the... relocation and stuff, já? Nobody's gotten in touch with me."

Anthony nodded. "Because of how government agents were sniffing around in Iceland, she and her partners were told to hold off a bit and let things calm down before they contacted you. But I think she should be in touch relatively soon."

"OK." And then Sören found himself asking, "So... you didn't know you were going to be stationed here permanently in Sydney to handle us a few weeks ago, did you?"

"No. I had a feeling I'd be in Sydney a bit longer than intended but I didn't know I'd be assigned here full-stop." Anthony shrugged. "It's a risk you take with this line of work, being shuffled off at a moment's notice. Not the first time it's happened."

"You're from... London, right?"

"Born and raised."

"Well, I don't know if you'd had plans for the holidays, but as someone who myself got

shuffled off at a moment's notice, do you want to come over tomorrow for Christmas?"

Anthony blinked in surprise. For a brief instant he looked wistful and then he said, "I... don't want to intrude..."

"Even just for a little while. I made Icelandic Christmas cookies, I'll probably make some more, and I think we'll likely have some leftover cake from Nico's birthday."

"Oh, well. If there's cake." Anthony gave a small smile.

"Jæja." Sören smiled back. "Come over around 1 PM? Tea, cake? If you're too..." Sören made a vague hand gesture. "To want to stay for Christmas dinner that's OK, but you're invited to that too."

Anthony turned slightly pink. "That's very kind of you, Sören. Thank you."

Their eyes met, and held, and Sören could feel the broadcast of loneliness, missing family. They came from two different worlds, but they had that much in common right now.

"I'll see you tomorrow, then," Anthony said, walking to the door.

"Have a nice rest of the day," Sören said, waving.

As soon as he heard Anthony drive off, Sören fell apart, the girls howling along with him*I have hit a new low in life, I am so depressed over losing my brother that I invited an almost-random-stranger to Christmas without even asking Maglor and Nico if it was OK first.* Sören wanted to be kind, of course, sensing it wasn't easy for Anthony to not be able to go back to London for the holidays, but it wasn't completely selfless on his part; Sören was paranoid of everyone and anyone, and Anthony was one of the only people out there who he *knew* was on their side, and he was desperate to have that family feeling even for a little while.

Especially with feeling like a failure as a parent, right now, feeling like he wasn't worthy to be Dag's daughters' godparent, watching over them, screeching as they were. Sören picked them up out of their pram, sobbing, feeling like he'd hit the lowest moment of his life.

Sören didn't expect this to calm them down, but he was singing this just as much for himself as for the girls. He rocked them as he sang:

There's a lady who's sure all that glitters is gold
And she's buying a stairway to heaven.
When she gets there she knows, if the stores are all closed
With a word she can get what she came for.
Ooh, ooh, and she's buying a stairway to heaven.

There's a sign on the wall but she wants to be sure
'Cause you know sometimes words have two meanings.
In a tree by the brook, there's a songbird who sings,
Sometimes all of our thoughts are misgiven.

Ooh, it makes me wonder,
Ooh, it makes me wonder.

There's a feeling I get when I look to the west,
And my spirit is crying for leaving.
In my thoughts I have seen rings of smoke through the trees,

And the voices of those who stand looking.

Ooh, it makes me wonder,
Ooh, it really makes me wonder.

And it's whispered that soon, if we all call the tune,
Then the piper will lead us to reason.
And a new day will dawn for those who stand long,
And the forests will echo with laughter.

If there's a bustle in your hedgerow, don't be alarmed now,
It's just a spring clean for the May queen.
Yes, there are two paths you can go by, but in the long run
There's still time to change the road you're on.
And it makes me wonder.

Your head is humming and it won't go, in case you don't know,
The piper's calling you to join him,
Dear lady, can you hear the wind blow, and did you know
Your stairway lies on the whispering wind?

The girls were in fact starting to quiet down, and then the doorbell rang again.

Before Sören could put the girls back in their pram and get the door, Maglor came out from the backyard and walked to the door. Sören wondered if it was Anthony again, and then he heard Maglor say, "Nina?"

Sören got up with a start, and with the babies in his arms he walked right over to the front door. There she was, wearing jean shorts and a white tank top under an open purple button-down short-sleeved shirt, her dreadlocks loose and spilling down her back, sunglasses on top of her head, grey eyes wide as her eyes met Sören's.

"Sören Sigurðsson," she said, and pulled something out from under her arm. "I believe this belongs to you." It was the lost sketchbook.

"Oh. My. God." And then Sören's eyes narrowed. "Wait. You... weren't... supposed to have our names." He started to panic.

"Allow me to introduce myself. My name is Alinta Johanna Jonsson. My father's name is Böðvar Jónsson. He is the younger brother of a certain Brynhildur Jónsdóttir. He and his sister Birgitta both left Iceland in 1989 at Brynhildur's request, Birgitta going to Scotland and Böðvar going to Australia, because Brynhildur was being attacked by the Norse god Odin and wanted her siblings away from Iceland and out of his range. Böðvar married an Aboriginal woman and was banned from contacting Brynhildur's children by their guardians." Alinta cocked her head to one side. "Sören, I am your cousin, and I live right here in Sydney."

Maglor took Kate and Tori out of Sören's arms and Sören pulled her into a fierce, tight hug. The tears came on again, and Alinta was crying too. They took a moment to look at each other and laugh, and then they cried again, rocking each other, clinging.

"They didn't know, when they assigned you as our driver...?"

"No." Alinta shook her head. "They didn't know, I didn't know. How I found out... well... that takes some explaining."

"Please. Come in." Sören gestured, and Maglor stepped out of the way.

"Well, I'm not alone. I have some people waiting in the car, who I told to wait on the odd chance that this... went... badly." Alinta sniffled.

"Oh, Alinta -"

"Call me Ali. Please."

"Ali. I'm sorry if you thought I'd reject you..." Sören hugged her again and wept afresh.

"I didn't necessarily think you would, just." Ali shrugged. "People have been shitty so I thought I should err on the side of caution -"

"God. I can only imagine what kind of garbage Katrín and Einar said to your father." Sören facepalmed. "They had a problem with aunt Gitta being gay, too."

"Fuckers."

"Exactly." Sören nodded and hugged her harder. "So who's with you? My uncle?"

"No... he lives out in the outback, but he's expressed interest in meeting you sometime so we'll make that happen. My... let me just call them." Ali made a "wait" gesture, reluctantly broke the hug, took a few steps down the walkway, and whistled, waving her arms.

A few minutes later Sören saw a tall, handsome Asian man with short dark hair, wearing a Pearl Jam T-shirt and black cargo shorts, and two kids who looked not older than five or six and were obviously mixed-race, both with long, wild dark hair, light brown skin, a blend of their parents' features. "This is my partner Kenny, and our children, Metallica and Megadeth."

Maglor's laughter rang out. "You named your kids Metallica and Megadeth."

"I sure fucking did," Ali said, and Kenny nodded. They threw the horns, and to everyone's surprise, Kate attempted to do so as well, which made Maglor laugh even harder.

"I like them already," Maglor said. "Come in. Make yourselves at home."

"NICO!" Sören shouted. "We've got company for Christmas." *And a Christmas miracle. A sign that everything will work out somehow.*

Chapter 30

Ali was dreaming again of herself in the body not her own - male, white skin, long red hair. This time she was traveling with Marcus Lauer. Hunting for something. They slaughtered people, mad in grief, in rage of what had been done to them. Tears of regret later. Two small boys, who became as sons to them. The torture on the cliff face again, the lost hand. And then the other hand burning, burning, constant pain, amplifying the never-ending grief and anger and regret. At last she could take it no more and threw herself into a chasm, down down down...

Ali woke up with a gasp, in a cold sweat. She lay there for a few moments, too shaken to go back to sleep... trying to breathe slow and deep to get the terror in check, but she felt disturbed to her core. She opened her eyes finally to glance over at Kenny, hoping he didn't sense the disturbance across their bond, and he was already awake.

"Well." She blinked, surprised. "Hi."

"Hi."

"Hi."

"Hi."

"Hi."

"Hi."

Ali folded her arms. "You OK?"

"I could ask the same about you."

Ali raised an eyebrow. "I asked you first."

Kenny exhaled sharply and pinched the bridge of his nose. "No. I had one fucking*weird*, fucked up dream."

"Yeh." That was somehow even worse than if her own distress had woken him. "So did I."

"Really? Shit. That... that's weird." Kenny sat up a little. "I'd wondered if maybe it was just, you know. Staying in a new place." Sören, Dooku, and Marcus had insisted they stay for Christmas in one of the spare rooms, even though they didn't live that far away. "Everything happening all at once with the move on such short notice, and." Kenny shrugged. "But this already didn't feel like my usual dreams. This felt.. I don't know. Different somehow."

"Different how?" Ali's heart was racing again. She was really hoping they weren't*different* in the way her dream had been different.

"Well, I was a white guy." Kenny laughed. "And you were there and... you were a white guy."

*Oh shit. Oh shit. Oh no...*Ali felt sick. This was exactly what she was afraid of.

"Oh Ali, I'm sorry, I'm not trying to be offensive -"

"I'm... I'm not offended. It's not that." Ali managed a weak smile to try to reassure him. "Go on, then."

"So yeah, you were a white dude, and you had... fucking *red hair*, of all things..."

Jesus Christ. Ali wanted to *throw* something right then.

Kenny went on, "And you were chained up to, like, the side of a cliff or something, and I rescued you, but I had to cut off your hand. Like I said, that is *so* fucked up. I mean, I want to chalk it up to the move, and maybe being symbolic of your old job being so hard on us and all but this..."

"I had the same dream from the opposite point of view awhile back," Ali said. "And just now I woke up from its... ah. Sequel, or whatever you want to call it." Ali looked down. "I took my own life because something was burning my other hand, arm, I was in torment constantly on top of my trauma." She shook her head. "It doesn't feel like just a dream, Kenny. It feels like something that actually *happened*."

"But..." Kenny struggled for words, his eyes tearing up. "But. But... I... I... I don't understand."

"Neither do I." Ali let out a sigh. "Marcus was in my dream."

"Yeah, it's weird, I feel like I know him from somewhere, but I couldn't tell you where." Kenny narrowed his eyes. "And that old guy, Nicolae... he feels like my dad, already, kinda."

"He's very nice," Ali said. She got up to stretch. "I don't know what to make of it all. It's obviously not *nothing* -"

"It never is, with us." Kenny made a face. "I mean, what are the odds that you would be driving your cousin on assignment and not realize it? And yet, here we are."

"Yeh." Ali nodded, and waved her hand to pull over a clean change of underwear. "And that my cousin is like us. And Nicolae is, too. I'm guessing Marcus is like them." Except Marcus also somehow wasn't like them, as well, and that was something she didn't understand either.

"Do you think we should tell them about the dreams?" Kenny asked. "Especially with this most recent round happening under their roof, and all."

"I think we should wait," Ali said. "It's enough that we're all together, and *a lot* has happened to bring us together, and I think it might be better to just chill for awhile before we mention having dreams about, like... amputations and shit."

"Yeah, you're probably right. That's totally a great conversation topic at Christmas dinner. 'So hey, how about that dream where I cut off my girlfriend's hand, but she was a dude? And then she had a dream where her other hand was in agony and she killed herself! Pass the plum pudding, please.'"

Ali snorted and moved a pillow without touching it to throw it at Kenny -*the Force*, Dooku had called it, a term he'd said he'd learned from an old mentor. "That's just wrong, Kenny."

"Yes, I agree. Plum pudding is totally wrong. It doesn't even have plums in it!"

"KENNETH GEORGE KIM." But Ali couldn't help laughing. She knew this was how Kenny coped with things, and she loved him for it.

When Ali and Kenny were changed, they went down the hall to another guest bedroom to wake up Metallica and Megadeth, and the bedroom was empty, which gave Ali a few seconds of sheer panic...

...and then she heard the sound of "Linus and Lucy" on the piano down the opposite end of the hall. She came down and saw Marcus seated at the piano with Metallica and Megadeth watching him. Ali felt a big grin lighting up her face; Marcus glanced at her and shot a grin back.

Kenny danced into the room and began doing a goofy shuffling dance to the song and then a moment later Sören was there dancing like Snoopy. They both looked completely ridiculous, which made Metallica and Megadeth giggle, and Ali snorted. Marcus was trying not to laugh - he gave Sören a mock stern look, which just got Sören dancing harder, and Marcus sat up and attempted to look even more serious and dignified in response.

When the song was over, Marcus took a bow and Sören gave him a little kiss. The way they looked at each other suggested they wanted to do more than kiss, but they kept it chaste, Sören rubbing Marcus's shoulder and affectionately ruffling his long hair.

"Can I try?" Metallica asked, looking at the piano, then at Marcus.

"They were taking piano lessons in Adelaide," Ali explained.

"Good," Marcus said, and then he nodded and had Metallica sit on the bench next to him. She looked at the sheet music that Marcus had in a folder near the piano, and he demonstrated the chords, with her doing as he did.

Ali watched, feeling hopeful - one of the things that had bothered her about their sudden move to Sydney was the children needing a new piano instructor, since she couldn't reasonably expect Jeremy to make the travel from Adelaide to Sydney just for piano lessons. Marcus seemed very comfortable with the piano, and as he walked Metallica through the song, he also seemed like he had an inborn talent for teaching music as well. Ali broke out into gooseflesh, feeling almost as if the move, finding these people, had been *fated* in some way.

Her eyes met Kenny's and Kenny spoke into her mind: *You feel it too.*

_

Sören smiled as he watched Snúður sitting in an empty box while Rasputin attacked a pile of wrapping paper and Pumpkin dragged a bow off like it was her prey.

Dooku had insisted that Ali and Kenny stay the night, and they had gone out last evening to get the presents for their kids at their house and bring them over. It had been a joy to watch Metallica and Megadeth open their gifts late this morning - all Pokemon and Marvel-themed, toys and clothes and bedding - and now the kids were eating Christmas cookies while *A Charlie Brown Christmas* played on the giant flat-screen TV. Kate and Tori were calm if not chipper, allowed to crawl around on the floor.

It wasn't the family Christmas that Sören had envisioned having in Toronto, but it was better than what he would have thought possible after everything happened. Snuggled between Maglor and Dooku on the couch, Sören almost felt content.

Ali looked pretty happy too, though she kept checking her phone with a nervous look on her face. Finally Kenny raised an eyebrow with a "Hm?", beating Sören to inquiring, and Ali gave a nervous laugh and said, "Oh, you know. I'm trying to check for texts or messages in case he wants something." Ali turned to the confused-looking Sören, Dooku and Maglor and said, "I got promoted to become the personal assistant of Joe Friday, one of the big shareholders in the company. It's why we're in Sydney now, we were living in Adelaide." She gave another nervous laugh.

"Ah." Maglor nodded.

Something about that seemed really odd - she was working as a truck driver and now she was a personal assistant of some high-powered corporate guy - but Sören didn't press it. Then Huan whined, looking at the door.

"Ah shit, he needs to go out," Maglor said.

"Can we walk the dog with you?" Megadeth asked, and Metallica enthusiastically nodded.

Ali chuckled. "Oh god, they've been at us for the longest time about getting a dog."

"Oh, you totally should," Sören said. "They're good for the soul."

"I don't see why not, if your mother and father think it's OK," Maglor said. Sören still was taken aback at Maglor's new fake German accent, under the guise of Marcus Lauer - though they had disclosed Force-sensitivity to Ali and Kenny, who had it too, and Ali had apparently been educated by her father on at least some of what happened with Odin, Maglor still was reserved about revealing himself as non-human and dropping his glamour just yet.

Ali and Kenny looked at each other and nodded. "I think I might stretch my legs and come with you," Kenny said, getting up.

"Yeh, me too. This is a gorgeous neighborhood and a walk would be nice," Ali said.

"OK!" Maglor got up and got Huan's collar and leash ready.

After Maglor, Ali, Kenny and the kids left with Huan, Sören and Dooku looked at each other and then Sören, not able to resist, gave Dooku a wicked grin before pulling him in to a deep, hungry kiss.

They made out on the couch like a couple horny teenagers - though Sören kept looking over at the girls crawling around to make sure they were OK. The girls were cuddling together near Rasputin now, who had gotten tired of killing the wrapping paper and was sitting atop his "prize". Sören smiled as Dooku kissed him again.

"Maybe we should put the girls down for a nap and..."

The doorbell rang.

Sören looked at the time, and realized Anthony was coming over at 1 PM. "Shit," Sören

hissed as he got up from the couch; Dooku patted his ass as he got up, which didn't help.

Horny and frustrated, flushed, disheveled and breathless, sporting a semi-erection in his shorts, Sören answered the door.

Anthony of course looked put together in a steel blue blazer and jeans... and he hadn't come empty-handed. He had a wheelbarrow with potted waratahs - red blooms - and a bag of potting soil and fertilizer.

"Happy Christmas," he said.

"*Gleðileg jól,*" Sören responded.

Anthony turned a little pink and gave a genuine smile. "I... er." He shifted his weight from one foot to the other. "Wanted to give you a little combination Christmas and housewarming present."

"Oh, that was so thoughtful of you." Sören grinned at the beautiful waratahs, and felt a little chill, remembering having painted a garden that he, Dooku and Maglor lay in with those very same flowers; those flowers had been conspicuously absent from their garden here. And now... "Come in."

Anthony was given a plate of Christmas cookies and a slice of leftover birthday cake; Dooku brought out Earl Grey tea. Anthony had the tea and then he said, "We should get down to business of putting these in the garden first, before..."

Sören accompanied him outside and watched as Anthony rolled up his sleeves and got to work putting the waratahs in the garden, and explained to Sören a bit about their care and feeding - he'd also brought an instructional pamphlet. While Anthony was there he also checked on the other plants without being asked to, and did a little pruning on the climbing roses, explaining why he was doing that.

"I'm impressed," Sören said. "I wouldn't have pegged you for a gardener."

"It's a hobby. One my late father passed down to me." Anthony gave a sheepish little smile. "I don't have a garden in my flat - a couple of potted plants, but it's not the same thing."

"When... you visit to check up on us, you're welcome to putter around in the garden," Sören said.

"Yes." Dooku was right behind, watching without Sören knowing he was watching until now. "I had a garden at our place in Iceland, and before that when I lived in London -"

"Oh, what part of London?" Anthony asked. "It's in your file but that's a lot of information to retain."

"Bermondsey."

"Ah. I'm from Blackheath."

"I lived in Greenwich," Sören said.

"Oh. You weren't that far. I'm surprised we hadn't bumped into each other somehow." Anthony continued pruning.

"It will be nice to have someone to talk shop with about gardening," Dooku said.

"Yes. It will." Anthony nodded.

When they went back into the house, the girls were sleeping in their pram. Sören smiled, admiring how adorable they were. Rasputin came over to sniff Anthony and proceeded to climb on him.

"I hope my cat doesn't get jealous later," Anthony said, petting Rasputin, who purred loudly. Anthony nibbled on a cookie. "You baked these?"

Sören nodded.

"You are phenomenal," Anthony said. "I try to not indulge too much but my god, these are like crack."

Sören laughed, pleased at his genuine appreciation of the Christmas cookies. "I feel bad that we didn't get you anything when you brought us those beautiful flowers."

"Oh no, please don't feel bad. I know you've had a rough time of it and I wanted to do something nice. And I'll gladly accept this as a gift."

"Well, OK. But did you get anything this year? With your family being back in England, and all." Sören couldn't help himself. "If you don't get at least one new item of clothing every year, the Yule Cat will eat you." He gestured to Rasputin, who was sitting on Anthony getting pettings and skritches with one hand, while Anthony worked on cookies with the other. "He's just waiting."

"The... what now."

Just before Sören could explain to Anthony what the Yule Cat was, the door opened - Maglor, Ali, Kenny and the kids were back. Huan bounded inside, tongue lolling, and Maglor marched ahead to the kitchen to get him water with a brief "hello" to Anthony; Dooku went with Maglor to check on the progress of Christmas dinner, and Metallica and Megadeth went to the bathroom.

"Oh." Ali blinked slowly. "You have company?"

"Till Jólakötturinn eats him."

Ali's laughter rang out and she facepalmed. "Oh *god*. Oh *no*."

"So your father carried on the traditions, then."

Ali nodded. "Oh, he wouldn't let us forget it. Mum thought it was hilarious."

Then Sören felt self-conscious and said, "Shit, I should introduce you guys. Ah... Anthony, this is Ali Jonsson, my cousin. Ali, this is Anthony Hewlett-Johnson -"

Ali's eyes widened. "*You.*"

Anthony's eyes also widened. "Well."

Ali came over; Anthony put out his hand to shake and Ali backhanded him. "You obstinate

fucking *twat*, do you know -"

Before Ali could finish her sentence, Anthony flipped her, and with Ali down on the floor Anthony got up, pulled his Glock pistol out of his holster and pointed it at her with both hands. "Put your hands on me *again*."

"Hey, what the fuck?" Kenny yelled, running over, and Anthony pointed the gun at him too. Kenny sat down, hands up.

Sören thought about using the Force to grab the pistol away from Anthony, but he kept that urge in check. "What the FUCK?" he yelled, not able to believe what he just saw. Kate and Tori were woken up by the disturbance now, and started squalling. "*Shit,*" Sören said and went to their pram. He picked them up and sat down with them, making soothing noises, and then he glared over at Anthony, who was putting his pistol back in its holster, and Ali, who picked herself up and brushed herself off.

"You want to explain what the hell is going on?" Sören asked.

Ali and Anthony gave each other a filthy look.

"I heard about what you did to Letitia," Anthony said to her. "I'm not taking any chances with you."

"What?" Sören couldn't believe it. "Wait... Letitia's on a leave of absence, right? What happened?"

"*She happened*," Anthony said, pointing to Ali.

Ali folded her arms. "You guys were standing in the way of me getting the information I needed, so I could contact Sören."

"So... so... so wait. You..." Sören cocked his head to one side.

"Oh, she hasn't told you that story? Letitia told me all about it. She went all the way to England, somehow got into Letitia's car, tasered her, tied her up, and threatened to dump all her computer files on WikiLeaks if Letitia didn't give her your contact information," Anthony said. "That's a bit excessive, if you ask me."

"Like pulling a gun on me for slapping you isn't?" Ali spat.

"Like I said, *Ms. Jonsson.* What you did to Letitia demonstrates that you are unpredictable and *just a bit dangerous*. I wasn't going to take any chances."

"OK. OK. *OK.*" Sören was getting irritated, as Kate and Tori continued to squall. He was most of all irritated with himself, for thinking Anthony looked devastatingly sexy in predator mode. "Ali, no slapping people. And Anthony, for fuck's sake, chill out, at least where my family is concerned." He glanced in the direction of the hallway. "Her kids could have seen that, you know?"

"As far as *why* you were not given that information," Anthony said to Ali, "I'm sure you by now know about the disappearance of one of your other cousins. We had to err on the side of caution. If I give that information away to just all and sundry -"

"I'm just angry," Ali said. "I went to a *lot* of trouble and aggravation to get that info out of Letitia. I didn't enjoy it. But excessive or not, I would do it again. That's what I do for my

family, *especially* if I think they're in some kind of trouble." Ali's eyes met Sören's.

"And I do what I must to protect the people I'm assigned to protect," Anthony said.

"OK. Just..." Sören pursed his lips. "I mean it. I don't want another incident like this in my house. Seriously."

"I apologize," Anthony said.

"So do I." Ali nodded.

"Just so you know," Sören said, looking into Ali's eyes, "he's coming by here at least once a week to check up on us, because of... everything that's happened." He glanced over at Anthony. "So that makes him part of the family too now, sort of."

Of course, in a Fëanorion-Finwion family, this is perfectly normal behavior.

_

Everyone managed to get through Christmas dinner without incident. Dooku sent Anthony home with leftovers, and Sören gave him another plate of Christmas cookies. Sören walked Anthony out, and they lingered on the walkway.

"I'm sorry again about earlier," Anthony said.

"Well, at least I know we're in good hands if there's ever a threat in your presence."

Anthony nodded. "My hands are very capable."

Sören's face burned and his mind went straight to the gutter, not wanting to think about such things as Anthony giving him a massage, or fingering him... Sören's cock started to wake up, which was exactly not what he wanted just now.

"Are you sure you don't want to stay awhile longer?" Sören asked.

Anthony nodded. "My cat is waiting."

"Oh right, you mentioned you have a cat." Sören smiled.

"When you asked if I had kids, I thought about mentioning him then." Anthony smiled back. Then he raised an eyebrow. "The Yule Cat, though."

"It's an Icelandic thing. He eats you if you don't get at least one new item of clothing every year."

Anthony laughed. "What."

Sören nodded. "That's not as bad as our other folklore. Grýla and Leppalúði are trolls who eat naughty children, they cook them in a stew. Jólakötturinn is their cat."

"And you lot teach this to children back in Iceland."

"Yes. Yes we do."

Anthony shook his head, laughing harder. Then he gave Sören a pointed look. "Clearly, that had little effect on your behavior."

I lived with scarier things than trolls. But Sören tried to keep it light-hearted. "Me? I am very well-behaved. Very nice."

"That's not what I heard. I heard you've been very naughty."

Would you like to find out how naughty I am? Sören tried not to entertain the thought of Anthony taking him over his knee. "Rumors and hearsay, I tell you."

"Mhm." Anthony's cheeks were a little more pink. "All right, I should get off now. I mean. Be off."

Sören wondered if Anthony was realizing how flirtatious he'd just been and was feeling a little horny too. Sören resisted the impulse to invite Anthony back in for a blowjob. *You barely know this guy.* Not that it had stopped Sören before, in his devil-may-care days when he got around.

Sören simply said, "All right. Well, have a good rest of the evening."

"Thank you. You too."

They continued to linger - Sören fought the urge to give him a hug. *Or something else.* Face on fire, Sören headed back inside.

Ali and Kenny were invited to stay for a second night in a row. Kenny took some time out to call his family in the States, while Sören showed Ali his collection of paintings, and they went through his sketchbooks as well. Sören felt nostalgic in a sad way, and when they looked at the sketchbook that Ali returned, Sören began to cry silently, falling apart when they came to the sketches Sören had done of Ali.

"It's like I knew somehow you were family," Sören said.

Ali pulled him close and ruffled his hair. "I know I can't make up for your missing brother. But I'm here for you. Well... when my boss isn't having me do things."

After the kids all went to bed, Maglor took Huan for another walk, by himself. Ali and Sören went for a late-night dip in the pool, while Kenny and Dooku were inside talking about history, a common interest of theirs. Being in the pool made Sören wonder if Anthony would have joined them in the pool if he'd stayed longer, and he tried not to think about what Anthony might look like in a pair of swim trunks, or nothing at all. He really didn't want to be horny and stupid for the MI6 agent assigned to protect them, and Sören hoped he'd get over it soon, not wanting things to be awkward.

In the meantime he *was* horny and stupid for Anthony, and Sören needed to do something with all that sexual energy. When Ali and Kenny retreated to their room for the night, Dooku went to the sink to wash the last few remaining dishes, including the mugs he and Kenny had tea in, and Sören dragged him off to the bedroom.

Maglor got in to find Sören and Dooku naked on the bed in the sixty-nine position, laying on each other's sides, sucking each other slowly, languidly. Maglor quickly undressed and then he knelt on one side of the bed and Dooku cried out with his mouth full; Sören sensed across their bond that Maglor's tongue had slipped inside Dooku's channel.

Dooku's moans got louder and Sören could feel it across their bond, Maglor's tongue rubbing that magic place inside him. Sören shuddered, knowing how much better it would be to feel it directly, not just empathically. A few minutes later Maglor did just that, getting on the other side of the bed and kneeling, his tongue spearing Sören. Feeling Dooku's mouth on his cock and Maglor's tongue stroking within him was one of Sören's favorite things, and he sucked Dooku's cock a little harder and faster, gently rolling his hips to fuck himself on Maglor's tongue.

Maglor went back and forth between them, eating one then the other, as they continued to suck and lick each other's cocks. After a few rounds he began to finger one as he tongued the other, and Sören sucked Dooku hard, going out of his mind with pleasure and lust. Before they could both come like that, Maglor pulled Sören off Dooku's cock and kissed him hard, sharing the taste of precum. Sören and Dooku looked at each other and decided a little return teasing was in order; they pushed Maglor onto his back, and after licking and caressing him all over, getting him more and more worked up, Dooku and Sören began to take turns sucking Maglor's cock and tonguing his passage, going as slowly as could please, until Maglor was panting, gasping, writhing, begging to be taken, used, fucked.

Sören climbed on top of Maglor, spread him, and kissed him again and again as he used the Force to pour lube over his own throbbing, aching cock and into Maglor's opening. Then, with a fierce, hungry kiss he grabbed Maglor's wrists, pinning them, and began to push into Maglor's slick, tight heat. When Sören bottomed out inside him they both cried out, and Sören rested there for a moment, looking into Maglor's eyes, seeing the love and the trust and the *want*. They kissed again and Maglor bucked against him with a little whimper, urging Sören on. Sören began to thrust, slowly.

After a few thrusts he felt Dooku behind him, gasped against Maglor's mouth as he felt the cold lube pour into him. Then he groaned, kissing Maglor harder as he felt Dooku's cock slide against the crack of his ass. And when Dooku was at last inside him, Dooku's arms tight around him, kissing and nibbling Sören's neck, Sören gave a deep sigh of contentment. It felt so *right* being with them this way, the three of them reunited after so long, and falling in love with each other all over again in this lifetime.

Dooku set the rhythm, thrusting into Sören, with Sören inside Maglor at the same tempo. They went slowly at first; Sören let go of Maglor's wrists and Maglor's hands roamed over him, every now and again reaching out to touch Dooku. Sören and Maglor kissed and kissed, as Dooku kissed and licked and bit Sören's sensitive neck and shoulder. When Dooku tilted Sören's face so they could kiss, Maglor leaned up to lap and suckle Sören's nipples, which drove Sören mad with exquisite sensation. Soon Dooku was taking Sören hard, and Sören was pounding into Maglor, relishing his cries, letting out broken cries of his own as the curve of Dooku's cock rubbed into him just the right way, and the grip of Maglor around him stroked him into a frenzy.

Maglor came first, and the sight and sound of him climaxing - the feel of that passage pulsing around him, hot seed spurting over him - sent Sören over the edge, Dooku finishing a few seconds later. They rested like that, Sören in Maglor's chest with Dooku against his back, safe and warm.

Then the need rose in them again. Sören pulled out of Maglor and, still on top of him, straddled Maglor's hips. When Maglor's cock was slick and ready for him, Sören impaled himself, crying out once Maglor was all the way inside, and made it especially delicious by tugging on both of Sören's nipple rings at the same time. A moment later, Maglor cried out as Dooku pushed into him, and Dooku's arms were around Sören again, Dooku's hand stroking Sören's cock as Sören rode, bouncing on Maglor, Dooku thrusting into Maglor as

hard as Sören was riding. Sören rode harder and harder, the passion consuming him until that was all there was, all that mattered, all that existed. Their bodies, their desire, their need. Sören lost himself in the fuck and could feel how lost his lovers were, right there with him, aching to come but not wanting to stop, shameless in giving themselves over to the rhythm of the heat, the mating frenzy, wanting each other so desperately.

The second climax shattered them, three voices rising as they came together, taking each other's hands. It felt like magic, like some ancient ritual to form a shield wall around them and all that they loved.

Laying there tangled up with Dooku and Maglor, Sören thought to himself before he dozed off that as much as he had lost, he was still blessed to have these two amazing men in his life, and he needed to hold onto that.

_

On Boxing Day, Ali and Kenny finally went back home. Ali promised to invite them over once they were settled more in the new place in Sydney, and they were invited to come over again for New Year's Eve.

Shortly after Ali, Kenny, and the kids left, Sören felt that gnawing loneliness again, once again missing Dag and feeling all the regrets and what-could-have-beens. But he made himself focus on Kate and Tori, who were playing on the floor. *I have to keep on keeping on.*

Just as he got himself a glass of lemonade from the kitchen and was about to sit down, the doorbell rang. Sören wondered if Ali or Kenny had forgotten anything, or if it was perhaps Anthony, and he walked over to the door... feeling that brief surge of panic, as he always did and probably would for some time, paranoid after Dag's disappearance.

On the other side of the door was Flóki, Margrét and Frankie. Sören did a double take and then he let out a happy scream as the three of them pulled him into a tight group hug.

Hearing the scream, Dooku came out from the garden, and then he paused in his tracks and said, "Well, hello there."

"What are you guys doing in Sydney?" Sören asked, still not able to believe his own eyes. "Did you come to visit?"

Margrét shook her head. "Feds started sniffing around us in Reykjavik after you'd been in Canada for a bit. This British guy with MI6, uh, Anthony Whatshisname..."

"Hewlett-Johnson," Sören supplied.

"Yeah. Him. The posh cunt who sounds like Benadryl Cucumberpatch," Frankie said.

Sören snorted. *Don't ever change, Frankie.*

"Told us we needed to relocate," Margrét said. "So we live here now."

Sören let out a low whistle. "Jesus, he's had his work cut out for him lately." He gestured for them to come in, and Dooku went to the kitchen to get refreshments. "So you guys... did you get the full relocation package? Name change and everything?"

Margrét nodded. "I'm 'Estonian' now." She made air quotes. "Maarja Siimar."

"I get to be Irish," Frankie said, "which is less of a stretch, 'cos, you know, me mum and aunt Siobhan. Anthony asked me to practice an Irish accent for him." Her voice changed from its usual Cockney to a flawless Irish accent like that of her aunt's. "I did, so. I called him a feckin' gobshite."

Sören howled with laughter. "I wish I could have seen his face. God." Sören wiped away a single tear. "We're going to drive that poor man to drink."

"Good thing I'm Irish now, yeah?" Frankie grinned.

"Speaking of driving people to drink... where's Maglor?" Margrét raised an eyebrow.

"Walking Huan. Here, let me give you guys the tour..." Sören put the girls in their pram.

Margrét and Frankie were duly impressed by the mansion, though they had been moved into a fairly substantial home themselves. Margrét smiled at the garden, musing "I should try to make a Japanese-style garden in our own yard." Then she scowled and said, "You know, if the heat doesn't kill me."

"Jæja, it's a bit hotter than what we're used to." Sören nodded. "Having a pool is really nice."

"We should get you back inside where it's cool," Flóki said, taking Margrét's arm. Before Sören could follow them, Frankie stopped him.

"Sören, I have to talk to you for a minute," Frankie said, looking ultra serious, shifting her weight from one foot to the other.

Sören raised an eyebrow and closed the glass door so they could have privacy. They took a few steps back away from the door, back into the shady garden area. "What's up? Are you all right?"

Frankie nodded. "Yeah." She gave a nervous smile. "I'm... I'm all right, Sören."

He was still worried. "Are you sure -"

Frankie stepped towards him, put her arms around his waist, and leaned against his chest. "Sören, I'm pregnant."

It came out before Sören could stop himself. "Hi Pregnant, I'm -"

"A daft cunt." Frankie swatted his ass. She looked up and gave him her best attempt at an exasperated look, but there was a twinkle in her eye and her lips quirked and then she gigglesnorted and swatted him again. "Goddammit Sören, I'm being serious!"

"Hi Being Serious..." Then Sören sobered. And then it hit him. "Oh. So you're... you're pregnant." A frisson went down his spine.

"Flóki can't have kids with mortals, he says. I mean, that didn't stop, like, the Greek gods from having kids with mortals but it's... he's not like that. He said after Sleipnir he... Jesus, why am I even talking about this." Frankie swallowed hard. "And your sister has her original plumbing but -"

"She had a vasectomy years ago because she didn't feel like she would be a good parent." Sören also swallowed hard. "I was there, I went with her to and from the appointment."

Frankie nodded. "You're gonna be a father, Sören. I mean, you already are now, with the girls, but -"

It crashed on Sören like an anvil, and he started to cry, happy and nervous all at once. He grabbed Frankie and held her tight, and they held each other, rocking together.

"So... so you're keeping it?" Sören asked.

Frankie nodded. "We can either arrange to share custody or you can be primary custodial parent and I'll come visit. We'll talk more about that when it gets closer to the date. You... you're not angry or upset?"

"No, I'm not angry or upset. I'm Sören." He had to.

Frankie swatted him again. "If you want your son to have a father who's alive, you better cut the shit, you."

"Son? It's too early to tell though, já?"

"Er, yeah." Frankie rubbed her head. "That just came out, I don't know why."

But it *felt* right. *We'll see when it gets here, I guess.*Sören leaned down and gave Frankie a kiss, one arm coming out from around her so he could rest a hand on her belly, which wasn't showing yet, and start to rub. "I love you, you know."

"I love you too."

"They... they know, right?"

Frankie nodded. "Yeah, we just have to tell Pops and Maglor."

"We will." Sören took Frankie's hand and led her back inside. "Do you have an idea of when you're due?"

"Sometime in July."

That bought Sören some more time to get ready, or as ready as he was ever going to be. *Kate and Tori are going to have a brother. Or a sister. Or a non-binary sibling.*Feeling elated and scared, Sören stepped back into the living room and pulled Frankie in with him, giving her a little twirl. He smiled at Dooku, Margrét and Flóki drinking lemonade on the couch, fussing over the cats who had come out for attention - it was nice to see Dooku was at least trying to be civil to Flóki, after everything that happened.

"You look like the cat that swallowed the canary," Dooku said to Sören.

"Well, swallowed something," Sören said with a cheeky grin.

"Sören, I swear to god," Margrét muttered.

Flóki grinned. "It looks like the sun is shining on you again."

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!