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Fandom:	The Silmarillion, Flameborn (Multiverse)
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Character:	Maglor, Sören Sigurðsson (OMC), Anthony Hewlett-Johnson (OMC), Nicolae Dooku (OMC), Alinta Jonsson (OFC), Kenny Kim (OMC), Frankie O'Riordan (OFC), The Norse Pantheon
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Blood Sings

by DumpsterPhoenix (verhalen)

Summary

Still reeling from his brother Dag's disappearance, while being threatened by Odin and the Valar and suffering a broken heart, Sören Sigurðsson learns how to fight dirty from Anthony Hewlett-Johnson, the MI6 agent assigned to Sydney to protect Sören and his family. Sparks fly between Sören and Anthony, and more secrets are unveiled, before Sören must put his fighting skills to the test for the first but what will not be the last time.

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 [all five works come to 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 [2020-2021], 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.

What is it that binds me? From what was the chain formed that bound the Fenris wolf? It was made of the noise of cats' paws walking on the ground, of the beards of women, of the roots of cliffs, of the grass of bears, of the breath of fish, and the spittle of birds. I, too, am bound in the same way by a chain of gloomy fancies, of alarming dreams, of troubled thoughts, of fearful presentiments, of inexplicable anxieties. This chain is "very flexible, soft as silk, yields to the most powerful strain, and cannot be torn apart."

-Søren Kierkegaard, Either/or

Loud howls Garm before Gnipahellir,
Bursting his fetters, Fenris runs:
Further in the future afar I behold
The twilight of the gods who gave victory.

Brother shall strike brother and both fall,
Sisters' sons defiled with incest;
Evil be on earth, an Age of Whoredom,
Of sharp sword-play and shields' clashing,
A Wind-age, a Wolf-age till the world ruins:
No man to another shall mercy show.

-Völuspa

The truth will set you free, but first it will piss you off.

-Gloria Steinem

Chapter 1

March 2021
Orlando, Florida

Sören was already starting to wilt in the noon heat - he couldn't believe somewhere in the northern hemisphere could get this warm in March, already 87 F / 30 C - unseasonably warm, and back home in Sydney wouldn't be much better, but he was almost regretting dragging Maglor, Dooku, and the kids out here to Disney World.

Almost.

Sören took a look at the mouse ears hats that he was making Maglor and Dooku wear around the park, and it gave him strength to keep standing there in line.

The girls were too young to really enjoy this, wouldn't be able to remember it - it was their first birthday, and Sören once again felt a pang that his brother wasn't here. Dagnýr had made him godfather when they were born, and when Dagnýr and Matt were taken gods knew where, Sören, Dooku and Maglor went to Canada to collect Carrie and Maedelle, and then they'd all had to go into hiding. Carrie and Maedelle Sulu were now Kate and Tori Lauer, listed on paper as the daughters of one "Marcus Lauer", currently pretending to be a German tourist in Florida. They were actually taking a chance coming here to Disney World so soon after shit had hit the fan, but to Sören's way of thinking now was actually the best time to take this vacation precisely because nobody who was paying attention would be expecting them to be this out in the open right now.

And the trip was somewhat on impulse. They'd had a rough few months getting settled into Sydney, lots of crying, lots of anxiety. They *needed* this. "I wanna go to DIDNEY WORL," Sören started yelling in January, and by February he'd worn Maglor down, and finally at the end of February, Dooku called their "fixer" Anthony to make arrangements. The trip wasn't so much for the girls, who were just babies still, as it was for them.

Flóki, Frankie and Margrét were watching Huan and the cats back in Sydney with the caveat that they get pictures; Sören remembered that and snapped a candid selfie of himself, Maglor, and Dooku, waiting in line under the blue sky, wearing mouse ears. Just as the two gentlemen realized what was happening, it was too late, the picture was taken.

Before Dooku could splutter a protest, Sören tugged his sleeve. "Hey, the line is moving."

They were in line for Mr. Toad's Wild Ride, one of the rides with no height requirement which meant lap-held babies could go on the ride. *The Wind in the Willows* was one of Sören's favorite books as a child, and he felt like a big kid all over again.

"I cannot believe I let you talk me into this," Dooku said in the fake Belgian accent he affected in his persona of "Nicolaas DeKok", chef.

"Stefan Kierkegaard", ostensibly Danish, tweaked his nose. "You're gonna go with me on Splash Mountain while Marcus holds the kids, right?"

Dooku facepalmed.

Sören gave him the sad puppy dog face.

Despite all of Dooku's protestations, Sören could tell he enjoyed himself on Mr. Toad's Wild Ride, and he looked considerably less grumpy in the line for Splash Mountain, while Maglor sat on a bench, bottle-feeding the girls. The sight tugged at Sören's heartstrings, and Sören stole a picture of him, not able to help it.

In the toboggan on Splash Mountain, Sören and Dooku stole a kiss.

You know you don't hate this. Sören kissed the tip of his nose.

I suppose not. Dooku nuzzled him.

It's OK to have fun. I promise you, you will not lose your responsible adult card over this.

Dooku sighed, nodding. *That may just be it. As you know, we've all been keyed up more than usual since...* He didn't need to say it. *Waiting for the other shoe to drop. Like if we relax again, if things are normal again...*

Sören cocked his head to one side. Things aren't normal now, and they never will be normal. Even doing something like this isn't 'normal people' stuff, because there is nothing fucking normal about Maglor Fëanorion walking around Walt Disney World in a pair of mouse ears, pretending he's German.

Dooku shook with silent laughter.

So, you know. Sören poked him. *We have to try to take life as we can. Þetta reddast.*

Maglor and the babies joined them on the It's A Small World ride, and even more than seeing him on the bench with the children, hearing him sing to them got Sören choked up.

It's a world of laughter, a world of tears
It's a world of hopes and a world of fears
There's so much that we share
That it's time we're aware
It's a small world after all

It's a small world after all
It's a small world after all
It's a small world after all
It's a small, small world

Sören reached out to touch him. *I love you, you know.*

Maglor kissed his hand. *I know. I love you too.*

"The years have only made that stronger," Sören said out loud, though softly. "All the laughter, all the tears... I have no regrets about the choice I made." He meant immortality, knowing the anguish Maglor was in, the guilt he felt about causing them to make that decision, months ago when everything started happening.

Sören could see Maglor was getting choked up too. Their eyes held, and Maglor said, "Wherever we go, whatever we do... I am home with you."

Sören couldn't help himself. "Hi home with you -"

"Sör - Stefan..." Maglor gave him a look, but there was love in his eyes.

Sören grinned. "So whatever we do, eh?" He leaned in for another selfie with Maglor. "Like wearing these mouse ears?"

"*Hells.*"

Chapter 2

March 2021
Sydney, Australia

Sören had been back from Disney World for three days - he still felt a bit jetlagged and out of sorts, but Maglor and Dooku had been wanting to get back into the swing of things as soon as they could upon their return.

After their surprise emergency move to Sydney in December they had taken on new aliases for the public - Maglor was going by Marcus Lauer and pretending to be German, Nicolae Dooku by Nicolaas DeKok and pretending to be Belgian, and Sören Sigurðsson himself had become Stefan Kierkegaard, a Dane. Dooku had practiced law as a criminal defense barrister in London for decades, and had since 2018 been retired in Iceland, writing novels; now he came out of retirement and in January he started a new career path that combined his love of books, gardening, and cooking and baking - a bookstore cafe called Tuin Van Verhalen, Dutch for "Garden of Stories", that showcased French and Dutch specialties, particularly pastries, and had a wide selection of used books across eras and genres looking for new homes, and there was both an indoor cafe and a portion of it outdoors with a garden of native Australian cultivars. Dooku didn't need the money, only something to do, so he paid his employees generously and it was known that 10% of the cafe's revenue went to Australian wildlife rehabilitation and conservation efforts after the brushfires of 2019-2020. Maglor owned a musical instruments shop called Face the Music where he also gave piano, guitar, and voice lessons a few times per week.

As for Sören, he still hadn't figured out what to do with himself.

Back in Akureyri he had owned an art studio called Logifugl Listaskóli, which had provided classes to the public at a reasonable cost - Sören was of the belief that art was for everyone, and he liked to help people get in touch with their creative side.

But the last few months of 2020 had been difficult. Sören and his family had never been normal - gifted with a mental power that they called the Force thanks to Dooku learning the term from a mentor he had in his youth. They had to be careful with demonstrating this power - indeed, exposing himself in public was why Sören's brother Dag had been missing since November. And they also had to conceal from the world that Maglor was an Elf, wandering the Earth for thousands of years - the legends of Tolkien were real; Maglor had met Tolkien himself and told his story - so Maglor hid his pointy ears and affected a glamour, wearing his black hair only to the middle of his back in public rather than its full length of down to his thighs, he cast an olive tint to his skin when it was naturally pale and even more flawless than it appeared in public, and he tried to disguise his eyes, which were an unnaturally labradorescent silver when glamoured. It was easier for him to disguise his eyes when he wore glasses, so since the move to Sydney he had taken to wearing wire-rimmed glasses in public - which as far as Sören was concerned, didn't really disguise him well at all, if anything the glasses made him more breathtaking.

Sören and Dooku were Elves reborn as mortal... Sören had once been Fëanor himself, Dooku his brother-lover Fingolfin. Sören and Dooku had been granted immortality by a certain Ingwion, the cousin of Fingolfin and Finarfin, and an ex-lover of Maglor; Ingwion had ascended and become the Norse god Freyr. No longer aging would necessitate them moving around with Maglor, though their move to Sydney had been due to exposure as Force sensitives. If this wasn't complicated enough, they had learned from Ingwion in 2019 that they were living in one universe that was part of a multiverse; in October 2020

the Dagor Dagorath of another universe was felt in Sören's world, though only a small handful of people knew what *really* happened to influence the chaos and disturbances around the world in the weeks ahead.

Feeling Fëanor and his family die in another universe had sent Sören reeling - his mental health had never been the best, coming from a background of abuse and only having had a few short stable years with Dooku and Maglor before the Dagorath hit. He had shut down his studio well before the move to Sydney, and he had been rudderless since then. For a time, he had been completely unable to make art. Then when the muse finally struck him again, he was told by the MI6 agent who had helped them relocate to Sydney after hell broke loose with Dag, that he had a very distinctive style of painting and it would be dangerous for him to show new work, risking exposure when MI6 had gone to some length to give them new identities and a fresh start. Sören painted for himself, but he had less motivation if he couldn't show his work outside the family.

So now he was trying to figure out what to do with himself, and drawing a big, uncomfortable blank. It didn't help matters that Sören felt like a failure for depression making him shut down his art school, after his mental health had interfered with his career once before - he had gone to medical school years ago and had a breakdown while he was an intern at a hospital. Both career losses were devastating to him - he'd wanted to be a doctor since he was a small child, and he'd wanted to have an art school for years before he opened one. The losses were devastating enough to be demoralizing, robbing Sören of the confidence he needed to try to start over again. And so for now, he was a stay-at-home father, raising his missing brother's twin daughters, who they had renamed Kate and Tori with the move after two of Maglor's favorite female artists, Kate Bush and Tori Amos.

Since Dooku had opened Tuin Van Verhalen, once a week he cooked gourmet meals and pastries at a local homeless shelter run by Borovkov Enterprises - Ingwion's company, under the alias Ingmar Borovkov. Ingmar Borovkov was a recluse, and Ingwion himself had not been seen by Sören or Dooku since he left in 2019. Sören had given up hope of ever seeing Ingwion again, but he still held love for Ingwion in his heart, after a very passionate fling they'd had that summer.

Of course, it paled in comparison to the way Sören felt for Maglor, and Dooku. One of the things Sören loved the most about Dooku was his idealism and sense of justice, sincerely touched that Dooku gave freely of his time and resources to do something nice for Sydney's homeless once a week. To try to put his life in perspective - he'd had a rough life, worse than many, but he also now lived in luxury and had family close by - Sören went with Dooku on these days to help in the kitchen.

Today, three days back from his visit to the States to see Disney World, it was one of those days again. Sören's cousin Ali was willing to babysit Kate and Tori while he was out. The one part of the job that Sören really didn't like was having to put his hair in a net, and Dooku insisted he wear an all-white chef's uniform like his own, in part for Dooku's sense of professionalism, in part so people didn't feel bad comparing Sören's clothes to their own.

Dooku was making French boeuf bourguignon and a Dutch zuurkool stamppot, with a French pear frangipane tart and Dutch boterkoek as desserts. Dooku was meticulous about detail, which Sören found reassuring even when it exasperated him - Dooku's careful attention manifested itself any number of ways in their relationship, and had helped keep things together in rough times. Now Dooku was in his element, performing wizardry in the kitchen. Sören loved watching him work, magnificent and confident and commanding, passionate and proud in what he did, wanting what he made to be the very

best no matter who it was going to - perhaps especially because it was going to people who had ended up on the streets, who Dooku felt deserved nice things which included good food made with love rather than cheap processed food.

In the kitchen, Dooku was an artist. Sören was intoxicated.

Sören liked watching him for other reasons - he'd always liked older men; Dooku had received the gift of immortality just before his seventy-first birthday and he was seventy-two now but very well-preserved. Tall - six-foot-five barefoot - lean but muscular from years of being physically active, short and neat silver hair and beard, intense dark eyes under thick eyebrows, high cheekbones and an aristocratic nose, olive-skinned. He had "resting bitchface" and kept his smiles small, Mona Lisa style, because when he gave a full grin it looked rather goofy, but Sören found those things attractive and endearing.

And Sören loved Dooku's voice as well - soft-spoken most of the time, though his voice could be powerful when he used it, a rich, velvet basso. He faked a Belgian accent in public for his Nicolaas DeKok persona, at home he defaulted to the Received Pronunciation of his life in upper-class London, the only son of Romanian counts who had left Romania after World War II and just before the Communist regime. Either accent made Sören swoon; Dooku also loved Sören's Icelandic accent, though Sören was cautious about speaking in public because to the untrained ear all Scandinavians might sound alike but the Icelandic accent with English was definitely stronger than the average Dane's.

Sören felt that flutter watching Dooku work in the kitchen, giving instructions to his assistants; they'd been together since fall 2017 but it felt like far longer - and, in a sense that was absolutely true - and yet, even with nesting as they did, Sören still frequently had moments where he felt the rush of giddy passion like their love was new. This was one of those times and Sören stole a moment to preen in the mirror, once again lamenting that he had to put his shoulder-length black curls in a "man bun" under a hair net for the kitchen, his hair being his vanity. Though Sören had much to be vain about, he had been called "pretty" more times than he could count with his full lips and little nose, enough that he thought he looked like a girl if he didn't grow facial hair; he'd been sporting a short beard since his early twenties, and he liked having a beard, even if it was a bit warm for one in the Australian summer which was thankfully now fading to fall. He was too pale in the Australian heat - he would be burning constantly if immortality had not changed his physiology. The ends of his sleeve tattoos peeked out on his wrists - flames on one arm, ocean waves on the other, that went all the way up his arms and led out to ink on his back, a firebird and a bird made of ocean waves, tails twined together. He had designed it based on the first painting he'd ever made. He had piercings in addition to his ink, two small silver hoops in each ear, and piercings under his clothing - captive bead rings in his nipples and a captive bead ring Prince Albert in the head of his cock. His usual mode of dress was T-shirt and jeans, adding flannel shirts in cooler weather; he looked like a rocker compared to Dooku's elegance. And yet, they were a case of opposites attract, each appreciating what was different in the other.

Sören found himself preening a little longer than usual, almost like he was subconsciously expecting something. He felt a twinge of self-consciousness about it when Dooku shot him the "get back to work" look from across the kitchen. But then as he wandered back over to the counter Dooku's eyes softened and he gave Sören that little smile.

"I can't blame you," Dooku said. "You're lovely."

Sören's face flushed and he crinkled his nose and bit his lower lip. Then he snickered. "Not like this." He gestured to himself with his hair net, in his white chef's uniform.

"Oh yes. Even like this. You still somehow manage to look like a wild, exotic creature even when you're toning it down."

Now Sören's laughter rang out. "Well, I sure like to do the wild thing."

It was Dooku's turn to blush. "I hadn't noticed," he said dryly; they'd had sex that morning.

"Of course not."

Not long after that exchange, Sören went out to serve the food, giving generous portions since there was plenty. In addition to serving what Dooku cooked there was a salad bar and fresh fruit that people could help themselves to, with Sören watching in case someone with mobility challenges needed help at the salad bar.

Sören didn't just like watching Dooku in the kitchen, but serving the food to the shelter's residents and others who came by for a meal was something he found he enjoyed. He'd never been homeless, though he'd lived in some rough spots in London years ago, and he'd grown up in poverty with alcoholic guardians. He knew from experience that kindness and dignity and respect made a difference when people were down on their luck and hurting. And it was therapeutic for him, too - he'd been constantly looking over his shoulder and distrusting all random strangers since the disappearance of his brother; it had been an altercation with a "homeless person" - the Norse god Thor in disguise - that had caused Dag to expose himself with Force use in public, which had led to his disappearance. Odin had caused the death of Sören and Dag's parents, as Fëanor had been the Fenrir-wolf prophesied to destroy him, and Odin wanted to destroy Sören first. Freyr and Loki – himself “hiding in plain sight” among mortals under the alias Flóki Leifursson – had offered to help. Even so, Sören was tired of worrying that everyone in the world was Schrodinger's Norse God or Schrodinger's Government Agent, so serving food at the homeless shelter was a way to dial back the paranoia as he saw most people were not a threat to him and his family at all... most people were perfectly mundane and normal.

Nonetheless, Sören kept his senses sharpened as he served the food. He'd learned when he painted others that he could often "see" with his mind's eye, that what he thought was imagination was in fact tuning in to a deeper level of reality. This was especially the case with the non-humans he'd known and painted, such as Maglor and Ingwion, his art capturing the truth of what they were long before it was revealed what they were. When Sören had made art he wasn't consciously applying this gift but when he served food at the shelter or had other course with the public he'd learned he could do so at least for short periods of time - not for long or he'd get a headache. But enough to prove that there was nothing unusual about the people around him. Enough to help him feel safe again.

And then, as he served one homeless man, he saw past the long grey hair and long beard, the leathery skin and dark eyes. He saw golden blond hair to the waist, smooth pale skin, no facial hair, a full sensuous mouth and beautiful features...

...clear, light blue eyes. The same blue eyes of Fingolfin, of Indis.

Sören tried very, very hard not to outwardly react. He smiled as he did with everyone, the usual "Hello, how are you today" - the man couldn't glamour his voice when he responded, Sören would recognize that not-Russian accent anywhere - and "Enjoy your meal." When the man sat down, Sören's heart was hammering in his ears.

After everyone was served and had been eating for a bit, Sören usually walked the room

to make sure the food was satisfactory, and to do some polite, friendly interaction with the shelter residents and other people in need of a free meal. Sometimes he would sit with a person for awhile and provide a listening ear for them to vent about their troubles, sometimes he would banter with someone to make them smile and laugh, sometimes he would play cards or dominoes with a couple of folks. Sören tried to not make a beeline for *him*, but he kept it casual, coming over only when it was the natural order in the queue, after he'd interacted with a couple dozen people.

"Hi," Sören said. "The food OK?"

"Oh yes, it's very good."

Sören took a seat across from him - he was sitting by himself. The man paused eating, and Sören leaned in and whispered, "Hi, Ingmar." Careful to use his human alias in public.

The man froze. Their eyes met.

Then the man quickly got up - leaving his food there - and he marched out of the cafeteria. Sören looked around, and even though he knew this was making a bit of a scene and maybe looked bad, with people staring, he still had to follow him. The man was trying not to run now, but walking faster, enough that he had a good lead on Sören and Sören had to run to catch up. "Wait," Sören called out. But he didn't wait.

Just before the man could go out the shelter doors, Sören put a hand on his shoulder. "Ingmar," he said. "Wait, Ingmar. Please."

They walked into a nearby restroom, that was cleaned every hour. After checking to make sure nobody else was in there, Sören used the Force to hold the door shut and Ingwion dropped his glamour, the full truth of him making a startling contrast to the old raggedy clothing he was wearing as part of his disguise.

"So it's really you," Sören said.

Ingwion looked away.

Sören's first instinct was to give him a hug. When Ingwion did not return the hug, keeping his arms down at his sides, and still didn't look at him, Sören stepped back.

"Ingwion. Did I do something?" Sören swallowed hard, tears stinging his eyes, feeling rejected, worrying that he'd fucked up somehow. "Oh god, what did I do -"

"It's not you." Ingwion finally looked at him. "I've been avoiding everyone."

"The Dagorath...?"

Sören couldn't say much more, and he didn't need to. Ingwion simply nodded, and looked down, folding his arms, rocking back on his heels.

Sören put a hand on his shoulder, wanting to offer comfort. "Ingwion. I am so, so sorry." The tears silently flowed down Sören's cheeks as he remembered driving as the Dagorath hit and getting into a car accident... the awful weeks after of grief and pure existential despair. "I... we felt it. We all felt it, over here. It was *terrible* for us, I can't begin to imagine how much worse it was for you, as a god, with the sort of awareness you have -"

"It was... quite traumatic. But do not pity me."

"It's not pity, Ingwion. I care about you. I've worried about you ever since you left, and..." Sören sniffled. "I'm still worried about you. You don't have to isolate yourself, OK?"

Ingwion looked away again.

"Ingwion. *Please.* Come back home with me and Nico when we're ready to leave here. Let's... get caught up. I've really missed you." Sören's voice was husky with emotion. "I love you."

"You should forget about me."

"*I will never forget you.*" Sören glared. "It's been almost two years since you left and I still love you -"

"Well, you shouldn't." And with that, the door to the restroom opened, Ingwion breaking Sören's hold on it. Ingwion began to walk out of the restroom. "Goodbye."

Sören followed him out of the bathroom, out of the shelter. "Ingmar! Wait! WAIT!" Ingwion was walking faster now, and Sören felt himself moving slower, as if Ingwion was using his power to deliberately slow him down. "GODDAMMIT, INGMAR!"

And then he watched as Ingwion ducked into a car parked at a parking meter by the curb down the street, and just as the slowness lifted and Sören could run down the sidewalk, the Bentley tore out onto the road. Sören stopped and watched it go, shoulders heaving with a deep sigh.

"Fuck."

Chapter 3

"Prrrp?"

Anthony Hewlett-Johnson opened his eyes just in time for a toy mouse to be dropped onto his face, bouncing to rest next to him on the pillow. His Siamese cat Craig climbed from his chest to his sternum, turned around, and, tail high in the air, put his ass right in Anthony's face.

"Jesus Christ, cat." Anthony cringed.

Craig turned around again, Anthony wincing as the cat bore all his weight on the sternum, and Craig leaned in and headbutted Anthony's chin, then his cheek, purring loudly. Anthony reached up and skritched the ruff of Craig's neck, chuckling. "Yes, you're a good boy." Anthony glanced over at the mouse and gave it a nudge with his mind, watching as the mouse flew off the bed onto the floor; Craig jumped down and chased after it. As Craig began batting it around the floor, Anthony sat up and stretched, and looked at the clock on his bedtable. Craig had woken him up ten minutes before the alarm would have went off.

Anthony hadn't been in the habit of taking afternoon naps until MI6 had stationed him in Sydney. It was March and the Australian summer was slowly turning to fall, but the Sydney heat was still oppressive; Anthony had spent plenty of time in the Middle East with Britain's Special Boat Service prior to his career in MI6 and he still wasn't suited for hot weather. He now appreciated the concept of a *siesta* and would take one when he could.

He would have slept longer than this, in fact, but he had an appointment. He was in Sydney specifically to keep an eye on a certain Sören Sigurðsson and his family, MI6 had decided they needed a babysitter after they had exposed their gifts a few times too many. Sören and his partners and children had gone to the States to visit Disney World in Florida, which Anthony didn't think was wise considering it had only been a few months since he'd had to make them disappear, but they had managed to get through their vacation without incident, and now that they were back in Australia it was time for his weekly check-in.

And he liked to allow himself ample time to get ready. He showered, then shaved his face with a straight razor, splashed on a little cologne, brushed his teeth, and spent a few minutes deciding what to wear. He felt silly about it. *It's not like you're getting ready to go on a date or anything.*

Except he found himself taking a bit extra care when he was about to see Sören. If Sören hadn't been his assignment and was just some guy he'd met, he already would have invited Sören to his bed and shagged the life out of him. Like Sören, he was gifted - though he hid his abilities, as the less his assignments knew about him, the safer everyone would be - and he knew the attraction was very mutual and Sören was polyamorous, though Sören was reluctant to pursue him for reasons Anthony hadn't tried to poke at. Getting involved with an assignment was a bad idea, and yet Anthony still couldn't help feeling giddy and stupid when he was about to go visit Sören for a check-in. So here he was, trying to decide what to wear, and feeling sheepish about it.

It was hot enough today that he opted to dress down, black cargo shorts and a navy blue T-shirt. After he dressed he came back to the bathroom to put in contacts for driving and

combed and gelled his hair, frowning at the beginning threads of silver in his black hair and the touch of crow's feet around his green eyes, and laugh lines. He had just turned forty-one last month, and though he still looked good for his age, nonetheless the signs that he was entering his fourth decade of life were a reminder that he was still alone, and fate was cruelly dangling someone in front of him who he wanted and couldn't touch.

The most maddening thing about it was the sense of déjà vu - like he'd been in this situation with Sören before, wanting and forbidden, and that of course made no sense because they'd never met prior to a few months ago, and Anthony hadn't been infatuated with anyone off-limits before now.

He waved over his Rolex and put it on without touching it, and his brogues floated over to him as he put on his socks. Craig began to meow, knowing Anthony was leaving for awhile, and Craig came over, headbutting his legs, and at last climbing up onto Anthony's lap then his shoulder, where Craig just hung, kneading Anthony's back with his claws.

"I know." Anthony stroked the cat. "I know. I'll be back soon."

Craig headbutted his face, and then climbed again, all his weight on Anthony's shoulder for a moment until he lay down again behind Anthony's neck, front paws on one shoulder, back paws on the other, kneading, purring. Anthony sighed, and groaned at the pitiful meow Craig gave, kneading harder.

"I have to go. I'll give you treats when I get back."

Anthony's mum Elaine had taken the cat in after a neighbor died; last October Anthony had moved back home to Blackheath temporarily following a sprained ankle when he fell down a flight of stairs having a war flashback, and then later a horrible nightmare where he felt himself die, and Craig had been instrumental in helping Anthony recover from what he called his "little nervous breakdown". Anthony had grown up with cats and was a cat person, but commanding a nuclear submarine hadn't exactly been ideal for cat ownership and the Royal Navy had banned cats on ships anyway, and he'd been moving around a lot with MI6. When Anthony left for Sydney in December for "just a few weeks", Elaine seemed to know it would be longer than that, and gave him Craig. Having a cat was good for the soul, and Anthony appreciated the companionship, but Craig was so *needy*. Craig climbed from Anthony's shoulders to his chest, and after headbutting his face a few more times Craig whined and gave him a mournful look that made Anthony feel guilty for leaving.

"I know." Anthony put his arms around the cat and rocked him like a baby for a moment. "It's OK. I'll be back soon."

"Mee-*owwwwwwwwwwww*."

Anthony gently put Craig down on the floor and then he waved over the lint roller, moving it around with his mind to get off all the cat hair Craig had deposited on his shirt.

Anthony grabbed his keys and his black aviator sunglasses. He lived on the second floor of a light-colored high-rise building in an upscale apartment complex, with amenities such as a swimming pool, a gym and a tennis court. He kept to himself unless he absolutely had to interact with one of his neighbors, such as when he used the laundry facilities. As he loped down the stairs of the light grey, air-conditioned stairwell his stomach began to do flip-flops, as was the case before he saw Sören. He put on his sunglasses just as he stepped outside and the bright sun assaulted his eyes and the heat was like a furnace. *If I ever meet the sun god, I am going to slap him.* Not that Anthony was religious, or

believed in gods.

Though he'd seen some very strange things over the years. He was about to visit some very strange things. He himself was strange and unusual.

Anthony's flat was within walking distance of Bondi Beach and it was a short drive to where Sören, his partners and children lived; the drive through the green rolling hills and treescape was pleasant, albeit bittersweet when Anthony knew how much flora had been lost in the Australian wildfires of 2019-2020. When Anthony had relocated them to Sydney, as coincidence would have it a home was on the market that his own mother had designed for one of the Bee Gees back in the 1970s, and had later been the vacation home of one of the Spice Girls, before going back on the market after the fires, when a lot of rich people were leaving Sydney. MI6 had wanted to spare no expense to make sure they were not only comfortable, but also secluded enough that there wouldn't be another instance of them using their gifts in the backyard and a neighbor noticing.

Anthony swallowed hard as his grey Audi pulled into the carport at the five-bedroom, four-bathroom house. His heart beat faster as he walked to the front door. He had a key - that had been non-negotiable, in case of emergency - but he still preferred to ring the doorbell first, that was polite.

He heard Huan, their corgi and Icelandic sheepdog mix, barking, and Sören's voice call out, "Jæja, I'm coming."

Sören answered the door. He was slim, broad-shouldered, and two inches shorter than Anthony's six-foot-two. Black curls hung loose to his shoulders, and Sören rubbed his short dark beard, looking a little nervous, long lashes blinking over sweet brown eyes. He was wearing jean shorts and a light grey shirt with the cartoon cat Pusheen on a couch, captioned "Home is where my butt is." He was also wearing fuzzy blue bunny slippers. Sören shifted his weight from one foot to the other, then his eyes warmed and his face broke into a grin, that Anthony couldn't help but smile back at.

"Anthony, hi. Come in."

Anthony followed Sören inside. "Am I interrupting anything?"

"My cousin and her other half and their kids are gonna be here shortly, but otherwise no." They walked from the foyer into the open plan kitchen and living room area, and Sören led Anthony into the kitchen. "Er, should I make tea?"

"It's too hot for that," Anthony said, making a face. Even the little walk from the carport to the house made him feel like he was going to melt, and though the air conditioning was on in the house, it always felt warmer in close proximity to Sören for some reason.

Sören also made a face. "Jæja, it is. I got back from walking the dog a little while ago and I thought I was gonna die." He glanced at the fridge. "You want lemonade? I made a fresh pitcher this morning."

"Yes, please."

Sören opened the fridge. "Actually I have two pitchers, one of regular lemonade and one with strawberries in it."

"Oh... in that case, the strawberry lemonade."

Sören poured them each a glass. Sören's glass had a whole strawberry in it and he fished it out and wrapped those full lips around it, sending a frisson down Anthony's spine, thinking about what Sören's lips would look like wrapped around...

"So." Anthony cleared his throat. "How was Disney World?"

"Florida was very hot. But otherwise, we had a good time." Sören crinkled his nose and bit his lower lip. "I liked riding the rides."

I bet. Anthony didn't need the mental image of Sören riding him, but there it was. Then he watched as Sören pulled a plate down the counter without touching it - Sören knew Anthony knew he was gifted *and* had stopped aging before his thirty-fifth birthday, so Sören saw no point in hiding his abilities around him. The white china plate had triangles of white bread covered with rainbow sprinkles. There was another plate just like it with more of the same down the end of the counter.

"I made fairy bread for my cousin's kids, but." Sören frowned a little and reached over to take a piece. "You want one?"

"No, thank you."

Sören nibbled on the fairy bread, looking innocent in his Pusheen shirt and bunny slippers, yet with a hint of naughtiness that made Anthony want to do bad things to him. Their eyes met and Sören gave a little guilty grin, like he knew he was too old to eat fairy bread but also didn't care, and then there was that little frown again and Anthony could sense distress; Sören was snacking out of anxiety.

Sören, of course, had more reason than most people to be sad. Just a few months ago his twin brother Dagnýr had gone missing - MI6 still hadn't been able to find him, and the trail grew colder by the day - and Sören and his family had to leave their life in Iceland on very short notice and start over again all the way across the world. Sören had left behind a career as an artist and art teacher, his art style too distinctive and with risk of exposing his true identity. And Anthony had studied Sören's profile and knew he'd had a hard life well before this, both parents dead by the time he was six, raised by abusive alcoholic guardians, a suicide attempt when he was performing his clerkship in med school, a year of heavy recreational drug use. Sören had found a moment of peace in Iceland and lost it, and Anthony couldn't blame him for feeling melancholy. Sören tried to fight it and "stay positive" but Anthony felt for him, and wished he could put aside professionalism for a moment and give the younger man a hug.

And yet, this went beyond that usual bit of sadness just below the surface. This was something more recent. Anthony fought the urge to probe Sören's mind, not only because it bothered his conscience to do so for non-criminals, but also because Sören *would* know and that wasn't in the best interest of masking his abilities. Instead he asked, "Are you OK? Is something wrong?"

"Oh, I'm OK." Sören shrugged. "Just... just missing someone, is all."

Anthony knew Sören had left behind friends in Iceland, and his cousin Ari, and his aunts Gitta and Jane in Scotland, but this felt deeper. Sören felt stung...

"Here." Sören brushed himself off reflexively and hopped down from the stool at the kitchen counter. "I was thinking of you when I was at Disney World -"

"Oh!" Anthony's face flushed, and his stomach began to do that funny dance again,

feeling a little thrill that he'd crossed Sören's mind at all while he was on holiday.

"-and I got you a little something." Sören walked to the coffee table in the living room and reached for a blue box on the under-table shelf, next to a stack of notebooks.

"Oh Sören." Anthony was strangely touched. "You didn't have to get me anything -"

"Close your eyes." Sören smiled.

Anthony closed them, and then a moment later he felt something drop onto his head, like a hat or cap. Sören took Anthony's arm and marched him along, and at last said, "Open your eyes." They were back in the foyer, in front of the mirror. Anthony saw himself wearing a hat with round black Mickey Mouse ears on it.

"Dear god."

Sören gigglesnorted. "I have one too. I got ones for Nico, and, ah, Marcus, and for Ali and Kenny and their kids." Sören lifted the mouse ears hat off Anthony's head without touching it and spun it around to show him the back, where the name *Anthony* was embroidered in yellow thread.

"Oh... oh god."

"I had to get one that says Stefan because, you know, pretendy funtimes. I don't think they'd do the umlaut for my real name, anyway." Sören made a moue.

On the one hand, that Sören had gotten him something he'd only gotten for members of his own family gave Anthony a warm fuzzy feeling. On the other hand... it was mouse ears, and he looked ridiculous. And now Sören used his mind to put the hat back on Anthony's head, grinning.

Then there was a key in the lock. Anthony watched with horror as Sören's half-Aboriginal cousin Alinta Jonsson, her Korean-American partner Kenny Kim, and their six-year-old twins Metallica and Megadeth walked through the door. Ali took one look at him and cracked up laughing.

"Wow," Kenny said. "That's. Uh."

"Oh, I have hats for you guys too," Sören said.

Ali folded her arms and then facepalmed, continuing to shake with laughter.

Sören shooed them inside - he dragged Anthony in. Ali and Kenny took the love seat, and Metallica and Megadeth got on a couch, with Huan bounding over to them and climbing on them, licking their faces all up. "I have lemonade, strawberry lemonade, and fairy bread," Sören said.

He got everything from the kitchen, carrying a pitcher and a plate with the other pitcher and plate floating ahead of him, and he took a seat next to Anthony on another couch. Anthony's face was on fire now, between the ridiculous hat on his head and the proximity of Sören. He could smell the lavender-scented body wash Sören used.

Anthony was here to ask if Sören needed anything, but he didn't want to be rude when Sören looked at Ali and asked, "So how's everything? Is your boss treating you well?"

"Yeah, Joe Friday has a lot for me to do - I just got done with grocery shopping for him. But he always tips, on top of the salary he pays me. I can't complain." Ali looked at the clock. "Nicolae and Marcus will be back in a bit?"

"In about two hours." Sören nodded. "If you're staying for dinner, we have some time to kill."

Then one of the babies started crying down the hall, and the other chimed in. With a groan, Sören got up from the couch. Anthony found himself following Sören to the nursery - Sören had needed an outlet for his art and painted a mural of rainbows and unicorns on the wall. Kate and Tori, who had just turned a year old, were fussing. Sören picked up Kate, and then said, "Oof, your diaper needs changed."

"Oh. I, ah." Anthony backed away slowly.

"No, it's fine if you stay," Sören said. He took the girls over to the diaper changing station in the nursery and used his mind to take out fresh diapers and baby wipes. Anthony hovered a few feet away while Sören proceeded to clean and change them, feeling awkward.

"So." Anthony took a deep breath, realizing he'd followed Sören in here to do his check-in. "Is everything all right, besides you missing someone?"

Sören nodded, frowning again. "As well as can be, I guess."

"Are you going to need anything this coming week? Any major purchases, any services..."

"Not that I'm aware of."

"And you were careful in Florida."

"*Yes.*" There was a slight edge to Sören's voice and he bared his teeth, which sent another frisson down Anthony's spine. "I realize you lot at MI6 think we can't behave ourselves but believe me, it's been *impressed* upon me that we have to watch what we do in public."

"I'm sorry. I have to ask."

"I know. It's... it's a touchy subject, is all." Sören exhaled sharply. "I have a real*talent* for losing the people I love. So suffice it to say if I can avoid doing something that would rip them apart from me again..."

The nursery felt hotter, though the air conditioning was on. Anthony felt his hand reaching, wanting to put it on Sören's arm or shoulder, to reassure him. He made himself stay his hand, not sure if the touch would make things worse.

The girls were still grumpy, so Sören carried them out to the living room, and when he sat with them he rocked them and made soothing noises, but it became apparent that the girls' distress was causing Sören distress. Anthony knew Sören was an empath, but it was more than that. There was that wound again, that feeling of being brittle...

"Sören, you OK?" Ali asked.

Sören nodded. "I'm fine."

"You're not fine." Ali pursed her lips. "Is real life hitting you after being on holiday?"

"I suppose it's some of that."

"Just some." Ali raised an eyebrow.

"You know what would help?" Kenny asked. "We should play some Team Fortress 2."

"Oh!" Ali clapped her hands together excitedly. "Yeh, let's play that!"

"Oh... OK." Sören managed a smile. "Let me get Kate and Tori calmed down and then we can start a game."

Anthony felt like he was intruding. "I'll take that as my cue to leave..." He got up from the couch.

Sören yanked him back down and Ali shook her head. "No, stay and play a game with us," Ali said.

Ali and Anthony had gotten off on rather the wrong foot in December - Ali was in fact part of the reason why Anthony had been the one stationed in Sydney as the "nanny", rather than his former superior, Letitia Fetherstonhaugh, who had been attacked by Ali when Ali was looking for her cousin's contact information. Ali had backhanded Anthony when they finally met in person and Anthony had pulled a gun on her, not wanting to take chances with her and end up like Letitia. But they had a mutual respect for each other, Ali was friendly to him now when their paths crossed, and Anthony admired Ali for that fierce determination that had taken her all the way to England to tangle with a MI6 agent. And it was apparent that Ali really loved her cousin and wanted to look out for him, even though Sören was older there was something about him that made people feel protective of him, even as he also felt protective of them. So even if Ali hated Anthony she'd want him around if Sören wanted him around.

But this was a genuine offer, and after the girls were quiet and sucking on pacifiers in their bassinettes nearby, Sören handed Anthony a game controller.

"I've never played this," Anthony said.

"We'll show you how."

Anthony ended up picking Spy to play; Sören was Pyro, Ali was Demoman and Kenny was Soldier. They played RED on a server against a remote team's BLU, and Anthony quickly got the hang of it, enjoying himself, especially when his Spy got in a backstab. He loved Sören's maniacal laughter as his Pyro went wild with the Flamethrower. For a little while Sören equipped the Balloonicorn so everyone could see in Pyrovision, transforming the scenery into bright and pastel colors with puppies, kittens and hamsters floating around.

Dooku and Marcus came in while they were playing, Dooku in his all-white chef's outfit, Marcus all in black, black Metallica T-shirt, black jeans. Even though it was a hot day, Marcus had his blue-black hair down, in soft waves all the way to the middle of his back. Anthony felt that flustered, giddy anxiety come on again - Dooku was handsome and Marcus was possessed of an otherworldly beauty that Anthony knew was in fact otherworldly. Even if Marcus's case file didn't say he was non-human, there was a feeling of something ancient with Marcus, something powerful. Anthony wasn't sure what Marcus was - MI6 seemed to think he was some kind of alien, and Marcus, who had also been

known as Mark Lowry and Alejandro Magalhães, had never informed the Brits or the Americans before that what he was or where he was from. Marcus was pleasant enough, with something beneath the surface that suggested it was a bad idea to ever get on his bad side. The thought of Dooku, Marcus and Sören making love together made Anthony crazy with lust. But though Dooku was a silver fox and Marcus was as gorgeous as a statue or painting from the old masters, it was Sören who captivated him, with those expressive brown eyes and full lips and a laugh that lit up the whole world.

He still felt stupid in their presence anyway, and he worried for a moment that he was going to be asked to leave. Instead Dooku asked, "Are you staying for dinner, Anthony?"

"Oh! Uh..." Anthony swallowed as Sören's eyes met his. "I don't want to intrude..."

"You're not intruding." Sören looked back at Dooku. "If it's OK with you."

"I don't see why not. It's about time we thanked Anthony properly for getting us settled in." Dooku gave a small smile. "Let me get changed and I'll start dinner."

"Do you want a hand in the kitchen?" Marcus asked.

"Come play Team Fortress 2 with us," Ali said, tugging on his shirt.

Dooku chuckled. "You're being summoned." Dooku patted Marcus's shoulder. "I shall manage."

Marcus came along and sat on the arm of the love seat. He joined the game as their team's Sniper, and a few minutes in Anthony felt Marcus staring at him, and noticed Marcus was trying not to laugh.

"What?" Anthony felt annoyed suddenly.

"Nice hat," Marcus said simply.

Sören almost spat his lemonade. "You still have the mouse ears on."

"Oh *god.*" Anthony wanted to crawl into the floorboards and die.

"It's all right. Wait." Sören got up, and a few minutes later he came back, ran over to Ali and Kenny, and shoved mouse ears hats on their heads. He handed mouse hats to Metallica and Megadeth, who paused their Pokemon game to put them on. Then Sören floated Marcus's mouse ears hat over and Marcus pushed it back at him without touching it.

"Oh no." Marcus gave him a look.

Sören gave him a look right back, and then took the hat and put it on Marcus's head. Marcus's glare intensified, and he directed it at Ali and Kenny when they doubled over, giggling.

"Wow," Ali said. "That's a good look for you, Marcus." She threw the horns.

"*Hells,*" Marcus growled.

Sören put a mouse ears hat on his own head just before he took his seat next to Anthony. "There. See, now you don't have to be ridiculous by yourself." Sören reached over and

patted Anthony's arm, and as silly as Sören looked with that thing on his head, his touch was still like a live wire.

Sören enjoyed himself even more with Marcus's Sniper in the game, laughing hysterically every time the Sniper used Jarate - "jar-based karate", urine in a mason jar - on their enemies. Sören also laughed every time Dooku looked out from the kitchen and gave them all a look, wearing their mouse ears hats. He was downright bubbly by the time Dooku announced dinner.

Dooku had made marinated steaks, with a garden salad. Marcus fed Kate and Tori in their highchairs, doing the airplane. They ate for a couple of minutes in silence - apart from Marcus's airplane noises - and then, sipping his wine, Dooku said, "The lot of you look absurd."

"*Takk*," Sören said, and leaned in to kiss Dooku on the cheek. "You're just jealous because you don't have swag like us."

"I..." Dooku pinched the bridge of his nose.

Sören got up. "Wait, I can fix that."

"You needn't -"

Sören ran off, and came back with another mouse ears hat, which he slammed down on Dooku's head before he sat down. The look Dooku gave him could peel the paint off the walls, and Dooku looked the most ridiculous of all with the mouse ears hat on his head, and between that and the irate expression on Dooku's face, Anthony tried to contain his laughter, but couldn't. Metallica and Megadeth were giggling hysterically, and Ali and Kenny were also laughing. Marcus gave Dooku a sympathetic look and put an arm around him.

"Now you feel my pain," Marcus said.

"Now we're all in the Mickey Mouse Club," Sören said.

Dooku protested, "I... *shan't* be -"

But now Ali and Kenny were singing, "M-I-C..."

"See?" Sören pulled out his phone and put an arm around Dooku, taking a selfie of them in their hats.

"K-E-Y..."

"*Why.*" Dooku frowned and made a noise.

"M-O-U-S-E," Ali and Kenny continued.

After dinner there was another game of Team Fortress 2, while Marcus took Metallica and Megadeth off for a piano lesson and Dooku retired with a book. When the piano lesson was done and Marcus led Metallica and Megadeth back to their parents, Ali looked at the clock and said, "Shit, we better get back so I can get the kids ready for bed."

"Do you want to stay and have tea first?" Sören asked.

"Maybe some other night. They're supposed to have a bath." Ali gave Sören an apologetic look.

Anthony felt reluctant to go, but he would have been home hours ago and he needed to feed Craig. "I have to go too. The cat needs to be fed."

"Maybe next time you come, I can see pictures of your cat?" Sören asked.

Anthony nodded, finding it adorable that Sören was such a cat person. As if on cue, Sören's own cats came over to sniff Anthony and rub against his legs, and Anthony gave a little sigh, knowing Craig was going to smell them and be annoyed.

Carrying Tori and Kate on a baby sling, Sören walked everyone out to the carport. He hugged Ali and Kenny goodbye, tousled Metallica and Megadeth's hair, and then Sören lingered outside of Anthony's Audi. The air was still stiflingly hot in the blue dusk, and Anthony was sweating for more reasons than the late summer heat.

Anthony took off the mouse ears hat, feeling sheepish that he hadn't done so already, though Sören was still wearing his. Looking utterly daft. *Would still do.*

"I had fun," Anthony said sincerely. "Thank you for having me over."

Sören nodded, watching as Ali's car pulled out. "You know, when you come for these, ah, appointments, you don't have to be so business-like." Their eyes met, and Sören shifted his weight from one foot to the other.

"Well..." Anthony didn't know what to say, and then he said, simply, "Thank you." He was longing to put all business aside and drag Sören into the back seat of his Audi and maul him, but he kept that impulse in check.

"So. Ah." Sören gave a wistful sigh. "Drive safe."

"Thanks, you too." And then Anthony facepalmed, since Sören was at home presumably for the rest of the evening. *You too.*

Sören giggled, crinkling his nose. "It's OK. I thanked an ATM once."

"It's terrible," Anthony said, deciding to be candid with Sören for a moment. "My mum took me out for my birthday a couple of years ago and when the waitress gave me free cake and said 'happy birthday' I said 'you too'."

Sören's face lit up in a big grin and his laughter rang out. "And here I was thinking you James Bond types are all so smooth." Sören's voice dropped an octave as he quoted, "*Shaken, not stirred.*"

Anthony snorted. "I hate gin. I'm more of a cognac drinker, when I drink."

"Good to know," Sören said. Then he raised an eyebrow. "When is your birthday, anyway?"

Oh god. Anthony exhaled sharply. "I just turned forty-one in February. On the fourth."

"You..." Sören gave him a little shove. "It was your birthday last month and you didn't fucking tell me?"

"Well, you know. We have to keep things professional. It's bad enough you know my real name..."

Sören scowled, which made him look even sexier. "You've done a lot for the family, I consider you part of the family, and I insist on doing something for your belated birthday."

"Oh god." Anthony was secretly delighted by this, but he also felt a twinge of panic. He wasn't used to having friends. He wasn't used to people caring...

"You want to come for Sunday dinner?"

"I really don't want to impose -"

Sören shook his head. "I insist, Anthony." Sören narrowed his eyes. "And I'll tell Nico to make cake. There'll be cake."

"Are you sure -"

"*Caaaaaaaaaaaaaake,*" Sören yelled.

Anthony did appreciate a nice piece of cake, a somewhat forbidden treat with the rigors of keeping in shape SBS-style. "Well, when you put it that way."

"What's your favorite kind of cake?"

"Yes."

Sören laughed. Then Sören gave him a look, and Anthony said, "Lemon. But really, anything's fine. And I don't want to be an inconven-"

"Thou dost protest too much. Be here at seven on Sunday. And I want to see pictures of your cat."

"Yes, sir." Anthony gave Sören a salute, and a little wave before he got in his Audi, face on fire, stomach doing cartwheels. *I'd rather eat you, my dear.*

Craig was miffed when he got home, ignoring him after Anthony opened a can of food and Craig ate his fill, still ignoring him even after Anthony set out treats. But when Anthony was ready for bed, Craig climbed in with him, as he usually did, and Anthony stroked the cat's fur, listening to the reassuring sound of Craig's deep, rumbly purr, looking out through the window at the moon. For the first time in too long, he'd felt included in something, like he belonged somewhere.

That was a dangerous feeling, especially with this line of work.

Chapter 4

Back in Adelaide, Megadeth and Metallica had twice-weekly piano lessons with an aging hippie named Jeremy Hogan, who they, Ali and Kenny were fond of. Since the move to Sydney, Marcus had offered to take over with teaching the kids piano and now they were mad for it, wanting piano lessons four times a week. Ali had felt a little self-conscious at first, not wanting to monopolize Marcus's time, but her cousin's partner was delighted that they were so eager to learn, and they were naturals, learning quickly.

"You may well have two virtuosos on your hands," Marcus told her one evening, "and I don't give false flattery. I would tell you honestly if I thought this wasn't for them."

Ali didn't mind if Marcus didn't mind. It was an excuse to go see Sören. She adored her cousin, though it was bittersweet, having been cheated out of family contact by Sören's racist guardians, not meeting Sören until he was thirty-six and she was almost twenty-eight. "Bryn would be turning in her grave," her father Böðvar had said more than once; everything he'd ever said of his sister Brynhildur, she was a kind woman. And Ali had occasionally seen Böðvar's other sister, Birgitta, who was very nice, though Gitta and her partner Jane had no children, no cousins for her to play with, and it was hard for them to get out to Australia when they had run a bed-and-breakfast in Scotland, and of course now after what happened with Dag, MI6 had established no contact with Gitta and Jane for their own mutual safety. Sören wasn't anything like the man and woman who raised him - he was warm like her father and their aunt Gitta, he was a very sweet, loving person who made her feel like family even before she knew they were family, when he had just coincidentally been a passenger she was driving across Australia.

But Ali was also reminded of a quote she'd read once:*The loneliest people are the kindest. The saddest people smile the brightest.*

There was such a *sadness* in him, that Ali had felt when she'd driven him from Alice Springs to a warehouse in Sydney, and when she'd discovered he was her cousin, it had given her a ferocity in finding him - she'd tasered and tied up an MI6 agent to get his contact information. Sören had seemed a little less sad as he got settled into Sydney, he'd been happy and excited about the trip to Disney World. And then, the other night at dinner, that sadness had returned, more sharp and stinging this time. Something was going on. Even if the kids hadn't had piano lessons, Ali would have carved out time to see her cousin, because that was what she did for family.

And Marcus had become family, too. Marcus, who also had deep sadness in him, and was so kind to her children. She didn't know what he was - she could sense he was not human, she knew he was alive during the Dreamtime - but he was still family. She liked peeking in on the kids' piano lessons, watching the last few minutes of them, seeing Marcus come alive as he taught music, shared a love of music with her children. She remembered hearing him sing on that truck ride to Sydney and it still gave her chills, in a good way. It seemed like music lit a fire in him, alleviated the deep pain in his soul for just a little while.

Ali sighed.

Kenny was playing hackey sack outside with the kids when Ali found them, jingling the keys in her hand. "Come on, it's time for piano."

The kids tore off and Kenny laughed. He came over and put an arm around Ali, walking

her to the car. Ali stopped in the hallway mirror to do a quick once-over. She and Kenny made an interesting contrast - she was six feet tall and a couple inches taller than Kenny. She had dark brown skin and thick black dreadlocks down the middle of her back, that today she wore in a high ponytail. She had grey eyes like her Icelandic father, and her features were a blend of her parents' - high cheekbones, full lips, and what she liked to call "resting bitchface", looking angry when she wasn't. Ali's white tank top and camouflage cargo shorts showed off her curvy and muscular physique, honed from having spent her formative years on a sheep farm in South Australia, and most of her adult life as a truck driver which involved having to haul heavy things on and off her rig; she'd also been chasing two children around for the last six years. Kenny was a little too thin, despite his love of junk food, with a high metabolism. He was pale, with almond-shaped brown eyes, high cheekbones, handsome features with a bit of a smolder. He was clean-shaven and wore his dark hair short in a faux-hawk, and had black gauge plugs in each ear; under his clothes he had a tattoo of a Korean dragon on his left shoulder, coiled in a circle, carrying a *yeouiju* orb. Kenny could have easily gone into modeling, but he preferred to be the one taking the pictures. Today he wore a blue-and-silver Hawaiian print short-sleeved button-down shirt with khaki cargo shorts. Their children - today in jean shorts, Metallica in a Pikachu T-shirt and Megadeth in a Charizard T-shirt - were mixed-race, cafe au lait skin, wild kinky hair in mullets, and looked like both of them; Ali knew they would be beautiful when they grew up.

Not that Ali had been thinking about children when she and Kenny met, when she was just barely out of school and giving outback tours, and he frequented them as a freelance photographer who'd just moved to Australia from the States. He became sort of her sidekick, and a fond friendship turned to something more. She'd quit giving outback tours at his insistence after she'd been bit by a snake, and taken up truck driving. Now she was working as a personal assistant, being paid exponentially more and she got to see her family much more often. Kenny and the kids were happier for it.

Of course, it wasn't without strings attached. Ali was the personal assistant of one Ingmar Borovkov, multi-billionaire, the founder and CEO of Borovkov Enterprises. She had been hired specifically because she had gone to great lengths to return a lost item to a passenger - that passenger being Sören - including roughing up a MI6 agent, and news of her exploit impressed Ingmar Borovkov. She found out rather quickly there was a reason why he wanted someone with that kind of dedication and fortitude, as he was exacting in his demands, which included being on-call to go shopping at odd hours, and he had a few dangerous contacts that made Ali glad she'd gotten in the habit of carrying weapons on her when she started truck driving, though she had as yet emerged from those deals untouched.

She also had agreed to a non-disclosure contract, and using the alias "Joe Friday" to refer to him if she had to talk about her job to family or friends. Kenny knew, of course, but that was the extent of who was allowed to know. Ali supposed it made sense - Ingmar Borovkov was notorious for being a recluse, keeping a low profile, refusing to allow photographs of himself to circulate; he preferred to do his business through handlers, one of whom was now Ali. But Ali lived in constant fear that she'd slip and say the wrong thing to the wrong person. As it was, she didn't know how much longer she could keep it from Sören, having the same gifts she had, something he called "the Force".

Kenny glanced over at Ali as she drove - she knew he knew she was feeling tense. He reached over and patted her knee. "You OK, babe?"

Ali nodded, keeping her eyes on the road. "Yeh. Just..." She shrugged, and decided to be honest about it. "That non-disclosure agreement is giving me anxiety again."

"Oh. That." Kenny sighed. "Well, if you slip, it's not like *Joe Friday* is going to rain thunder and lightning bolts down on your head. I'm sure you can impress upon Sören or Marcus that they're not supposed to know..."

"Yeh, I know. It's just the principle of the thing." Ali shrugged again.

"Well, try not to worry too much, OK? Or I'll have to tickle you." Kenny gave her a look. "I might tickle you anyway."

"You better not tickle me while I'm driving, Kenneth George Kim."

Kenny waited until they were in the carport. Ali shrieked and the children giggled. "Get her, Dad!" Metallica yelled, as Ali doubled over, leaning against the car, heaving. Sören and Marcus came running to see what the noise was just as Ali used her mind to shove Kenny back and then she tackled him and returned the favor, tickling his armpits.

"Help," Kenny cried.

"He started it," Ali said, tickling harder.

Sören and Marcus looked at each other, and then Sören put a hand on his hip. "Do I have to give you a time out?"

"I don't know, *Dad*," Ali teased, and noticed Marcus's eyebrow went way up at that, his mouth open slightly as he looked at Ali, then back at Sören. She wondered about that briefly, then put that reaction "on file" in the back of her head as she returned her focus to her dork of a partner. "He should get more of a time out." She let go of Kenny, and then she put him in a headlock and gave him a noogie.

"Yeah, well," Kenny said, "you're a doodyhead." He blew a raspberry.

"No, you," Ali said.

"No you."

"No you -"

"I'll get *Nico* to give you a time out," Sören said, folding his arms. "*As you know*, he's worse than I am..."

"That *shan't* be necessary," Kenny said, his voice dropping in an imitation of Dooku's basso, and Ali spluttered, gigglesnorting.

They followed Sören and Marcus inside. Sören got lemonade for everyone, and Sören and Kenny set up the gaming console while Ali marched Metallica and Megadeth into the music room. After the kids finished their lemonade, Metallica sat next to Marcus at the piano and practiced scales, as Marcus encouraged her with "Good," and then it was Megadeth's turn, and Marcus encouraged him as well. Ali clapped when they were done - even though it was just scales, she was proud of them. Then Marcus asked, "Do you want to play something for your mum?" The kids nodded, and Marcus moved back, letting the kids sit on the bench together.

Metallica and Megadeth began to play "Heart and Soul" together. Ali got a tight lump in her throat, eyes watering with pride and joy to see her kids playing so well at this age and enjoying it. She began to wonder seriously if they might have a career in music, not that

she would push them if they didn't want to, but she'd do everything she could for them if that was what they wanted...

"Yayyyyy!" Ali stood up and clapped harder when the song was done. Marcus gave them each a chocolate truffle. "*Wunderbar!*," Marcus said, though Ali knew Marcus wasn't actually German.

"Do you think we could start coming for lessons *five* days a week?" Megadeth asked.

"I'm afraid not, kiddo," Marcus said in his not-German accent.

"Yeh, honey, he's got other things to do," Ali said.

"I've got music practice of my own. I'm in a band."

"Oh!" Ali didn't know that. "Really?"

Marcus nodded. "Sören's sister Margrét - well, now she's going by Maarja - she needed an outlet for music, but she can't do exactly what she was doing in Iceland, can't run the risk of exposure..."

"Right." Ali nodded.

"Well, her old band in Iceland, she just screamed and it was very dissonant, not my cup of tea, but she has a good singing voice, and she asked if I wanted to do something like Depeche Mode, The Cure, Siouxie... so, we've been doing that."

"That's good," Ali said. "I'd love to hear you sometime."

"Oh!" Marcus blinked. "I wouldn't have thought you'd be into that kind of music, you don't look particularly goth..." Marcus, of course, wore all black all the time, even in obscene heat like today's weather.

"I had a goth phase when I was a teenager," Ali said, remembering the days of all black clothing in the heat in the Australian outback, too much eye makeup that would inevitably run down her face with the sweat.

Marcus gave a small, bitter smile. "It's not a phase. This is who I really am."

Even though Ali knew there was deep sadness behind that statement, Ali laughed at Marcus quoting the meme. Marcus's smile became less bitter and Marcus went on to joke, "I'm so goth, I was there when they sacked Rome."

Ali knew that wasn't entirely a joke, though Marcus had yet to disclose what he actually was. "Yeh, well..." Ali couldn't resist. "I'm so goth I was born black."

Marcus facepalmed and shook with silent laughter. Ali grinned, pleased with her joke.

Then Marcus grinned back. It was so rare to see him smile like that, and it was as beautiful as watching something like a sudden rainbow. For the briefest instant, Marcus's eyes shone with a strange light, an iridescent flash that reminded Ali of labradorite, and then they were back to their usual silver-grey. Ali's breath caught, and she felt a tug at her heartstrings. She restrained the fierce urge to scoop him up into a hug and hold him tight, wanting to preserve that moment of sunshine through the clouds, protect the heart that had known so much sorrow. She didn't want to overstep her bounds with touching him.

She got up instead. "I'll let you get to the lessons," she said, and tousled her kids' hair on the way out of the music room.

Sören and Kenny were playing Super Mario Brothers, and Sören had produced cold bottles of beer alongside their glasses of lemonade. Kate and Tori were nearby in their bassinettes, sucking on pacifiers. Ali sat down on the other side of Kenny, in front of the baby girls, and began to rock the twin bassinette rocker with her foot, cooing at them. She felt a little wistful pang, as it had been years since Metallica and Megadeth were that small. Sören grinned at her fussing over the babies, and Kenny smiled, draping an arm around her.

You're so damn cute, Kenny spoke into her mind.

Dooku came in from the sliding glass doors leading out to the garden and pool in back. He gave a small smile and nod in acknowledgment. "Hello, Alinta, Kenneth," he said, ever formal.

Ali waved and Kenny called back, "Hi, Dad." While Ali calling Sören "Dad" in the carport area was meant as a joke, Kenny had remarked privately more than once that Dooku was like a second father to him. Dooku's eyes crinkled before he walked into the kitchen, and Sören beamed at him.

Ali heard the kitchen sink run, and looked over to watch Dooku washing his hands. Then he opened the fridge and took out chicken and an assortment of fresh produce - peppers, mushrooms, onions.

"Oh, are you making skewers tonight?" Ali asked. That was one of her favorite things.

"Indeed I am," Dooku said.

Sören and Kenny continued playing to the sound of Dooku chopping vegetables in the kitchen, until Huan trotted up to the glass doors and whined. Sören frowned. "Ah shit, he needs to go out."

"I can take him out," Dooku said, chopping vegetables.

"No, you're making dinner." Sören hit pause on the game. "I'll take the dog out. He hasn't been on a walk today, anyway."

"Kenneth, would you care to assist me in the kitchen?" Dooku asked.

"Sure, I can do that," Kenny said. He, Sören and Ali got up from the couch, and Kenny patted Ali before he walked off to the kitchen.

Sören put the girls in their stroller, and he and Ali headed out, Ali walking Huan as Sören pushed the stroller. It was dusk and muggy, and Sören made a face as they stepped out into the humid air. Huan wagged his tail as they walked, tongue lolling, and Ali smiled at the dog.

"He's a good boy," Ali said. "I keep thinking about getting the kids a dog but I dunno yet."

"I'm surprised you hadn't already got one," Sören said.

"Well, yanno. Between me being on the road all the time and Kenny having to take care

of the kids so much, I felt like I'd be overloading him with a dog, too. Plus there was always the fear that work would dry up for us and we'd be struggling to make ends meet and having to feed a dog and ourselves. We don't have to worry about any of that anymore, haven't for a few months now, but it still feels surreal."

"Yeah." Sören exhaled sharply. "Tell me about it. I live in a*mansion*. I'm a fucking millionaire. Far cry from growing up wearing neighbors' cast-offs, eating French toast for dinner, or when I was a barista in Greenwich and could barely make bills every month."

"How did that happen, anyway?"

"What, me living in the UK?" Sören pursed his lips. "I moved there about a year after Marcus left -"

"He left you?" Ali couldn't believe it, seeing Sören and Marcus together, the way they looked at each other, the way they touched each other, the way their energy flowed together.

Sören nodded. "2014. It..." He sighed. "It's a long story. He came back, five years later. After Nico and I were married."

"Wow." Ali was curious what made Marcus leave, and what made him return, but she wasn't going to pry, sensing that was a sore subject for Sören even as it was apparent everything had worked out with the three of them. And that wasn't what she'd been asking about anyway. "Actually, though, I was asking about. You know. Being a millionaire. Did you, like, sell your art to the right person, or...?"

"I wish," Sören said, laughing. Then he stroked his beard. "Well, from a certain point of view I suppose that's not inaccurate, as the person in question owns artwork of mine."

"The... person in question." *Curiouser and curiouser.*

Sören's nostrils flared and the air seemed to vibrate and get a bit warmer; Ali could feel this was an even touchier subject than Marcus leaving had been. "It's complicated."

"OK. You don't have to talk about it if you don't want to..."

Sören looked around. He lived in a fairly secluded cul-de-sac, with plenty of space between neighbors, lots of greenery, and right now it didn't seem like there was anyone around to overhear. But Ali knew he was still cautious - after the disappearance of his brother, Ali couldn't blame him for that. "No, it's about time I told you a few things. But, ah. Let's get back to the house first."

"Fair."

They continued their walk to the end of the cul-de-sac. Huan did his business, Sören scooped it up and put it in a biodegradable bag, and then they walked back to the house. Sören led them around back. Dooku and Kenny were loading the grill, and when they went inside, Sören took a seat on the bench and Ali sat next to him. Huan came over and put his front paws on Sören's knee, leaning up to lick his face as if he knew Sören was in distress. Ali took his hand without thinking about it, and Sören squeezed. The peace of the garden at dusk, with its roses climbing the wall, its waratahs and ferns and palms, the pool shimmering in the light from the bulb above the back door, was in direct contrast to the fraught mood, hysteria rising in Sören, desperately trying to contain it but Ali could feel the unvoiced cries, the shattering...

"OK, so." Sören took a deep breath. "Part of why MI6 is all up in our shit is, well, it's not just because of this." A tennis ball floated from across the yard into Sören's hand, and he tossed it out for Huan to fetch. Huan brought it back and Sören tossed it out again. "Marcus isn't human, and he has... history... with this guy. Who wanted to make sure that Marcus pulled his head out of his arse with us... and wanted us to be set for life."

Ali wasn't surprised by the confirmation that Marcus wasn't human. "Were he and Marcus..."

Sören nodded. Then Sören pursed his lips. "I ended up getting involved with him too. Actually, he was the catalyst for me and Nico opening up our relationship. We had, ah... a fling in summer 2019." Sören looked down at his Doc Martens. "I fell in love with him, Ali."

"And he left too?"

"Yes and no. I think he stayed away because he knew something was coming." Sören looked off into the distance and for a brief instant Ali felt it - *dead-we're-all-dead* spiraling into a deep, crushing depression, haunted by visions of a white flash, something like the Big Bang in reverse, a universe imploding on itself. Ali wondered if it was related to the horrible, godawful nightmare she'd had last October, also dreaming of a white flash like a nuke, watching everyone she loved die before she and Kenny also succumbed. And not for the first time, she wondered if it was related to that recurring nightmare she'd started having just before Christmas last year. Pursuing something very important, led into a trap, captured and tortured, chained to a rock face and losing her arm, yet still pressing onward, waking up screaming "*My oath! My oath!*"

Ali felt a chill down her spine. And then Sören slammed that part of his mind shut, and he squirmed a little, as if he knew Ali had seen a touch of something that he wasn't ready to talk about yet, maybe - judging from the terrible weight of it, the screaming pain inside - not ever ready to discuss.

"He went away on, ah." Sören cleared his throat. "Business."

Ali got the sense that was a euphemism. Sören folded his arms then. "I didn't think I'd ever see him again. And honestly..." Sören gave a bitter little laugh. "If it wasn't for the fact that Mag - er, Marcus - has a history with this guy, and he hadn't left us all of this money, I'd be thinking I hallucinated the whole thing. Because really. I'm just... I was a starving artist for years. And a fucking *billionaire* had a fling with me."

"Don't sell yourself short, Sören."

"Wellllllll, I ran into him a few days ago." Sören's eyes were too bright and there was a wistful waver in his voice now. "After not seeing him for so long, thinking I'd never see him again... he's in Sydney. And I tried to talk to him and he said I should forget about him. And I mean." Sören snorted. "Maybe he's right. We come from two different worlds, *literally*, but also, I don't know what he'd want with someone like me, when he's a multi-billionaire, he's Ingmar Fucking Borovkov -"

Ali gasped. Then Sören's hand slammed over his mouth, like he wasn't supposed to tell anyone that particular detail. "Er," Sören said. "Ah. Ali. I... shouldn't have told you that -"

"Sören." Ali reached out and turned Sören to face her, putting her hands on his shoulders. She looked into his eyes. "You know how I'm the personal assistant of Joe Friday?"

"Uh, yeah?"

Ali nodded. "That's Ingmar Borovkov's alias. I signed a non-disclosure agreement but goddammit -"

"Oh my god, what are the fucking odds."

"Seriously."

"That's..." Sören blinked in disbelief. "That's quite a coincidence."

"Quite." Ali put her hands on her hips. The gears were turning in her head now. "Sören, let me tell you, working as his personal assistant since the end of December, I've gotten to know him pretty well, insofar as Ingmar will let himself be known. He... does not let people anywhere near him. The fact that he let *you* past an arm's length says a lot."

"I guess." Sören shrugged, scowling. "Doesn't matter now."

"Oh, I think it does. I don't know what this business is where he went away, but he has that same sort of, ah." Ali made a vague hand gesture. "Energy that you have, and Marcus has, and people I know who lost everything in the wildfires have. He keeps a very tight mask on it, but it's there. And sure, maybe it was just a fling to him and he's moved on, but I doubt it, considering he doesn't let anyone near him. Maybe he's trying to push you away." The gears in her head were turning harder, louder. "Marcus did that, didn't he? He ran."

Sören nodded and closed his eyes, silent tears spilling down his cheeks.

Ali gave her cousin a tight hug, squeezing him hard.

"The irony is that Ingmar dragged Marcus back to me," Sören said. "He wouldn't let Marcus run away from me. But now he's doing the same goddamn thing himself, *fokking þrjóskur litli skíta...*"

If Sören was starting to lapse into Icelandic, he was about to have a meltdown. Ali's father was the same way, though he made sure to never take his temper out on the kids, going for a long walk or bike ride to blow off steam. Sören's skin was feverish, like a reactor. Ali rocked him and stroked his curls. Huan whined, laying down at their feet.

Ali made Sören look into her eyes again. She felt a flare of anger - both empathy from Sören's hurt, his wounded *pride*, feeling rejected, cast aside, and her own fierce protective instincts towards her own family. She had half a mind to get in her car and drive to Ingmar Borovkov's mansion and tear him a new one for Sören's broken heart. But she remembered again that deep melancholy, that sense of *loss* that Ingmar tried to contain, and Ali's suspicion that Ingmar had hired her for contact with another person as much as he'd wanted someone to help manage his affairs and preserve his low profile.

What she was about to suggest was potentially going to get her fired, but she was nothing if not determined to do what she could do to *fix* things. She'd always been like that, as long as she could remember. It got her in trouble plenty of times. She never learned her lesson, and she wasn't about to be daunted now.

"Sören. Breathe. Deep breaths." Ali demonstrated, breathing as much to calm herself down as she was trying to help her cousin regain equilibrium. Then she said, "OK. You need closure, if nothing else. I can get you in to see him -"

"I don't think he'd make an appointment with me," Sören said, shaking his head. "And he'd probably bitch at you for suggesting it."

"I wasn't suggesting an appointment." Ali folded her arms. "I'm going to take you to work with me. To his home."

Sören raised an eyebrow. "I don't want you to get fired because of me -"

Ali shrugged. "He hired me because of what I did to that Letitia Fetherstonhaugh. If he fires me, well... he fires me. But I find it really hard to believe that he doesn't know he hired the cousin of an ex-lover, and if he actually *doesn't* know that, it would have only been a matter of time before he found out some other way. So. Tomorrow. You game?"

"Oh god, tomorrow." Sören made a noise. "I'm really nervous -"

"I know. But you get it done, get it over with, one way or the other. He wants me there at his place by one PM. That should give you enough time to get ready, yeh?"

Sören nodded. Then he smirked. "At least it's not first thing in the morning. I fucking hate mornings."

Ali laughed and patted him. "OK. So I'll swing by to pick you up a little after twelve. I'll have to smuggle you in, since he's expecting me but his guards may well stop a second person."

"So what, I'm about to become a Trojan Horse?" And then Sören snickered. "Not that we actually need to use Trojans... maybe the horse part is still accurate, since I've given him some rides..."

Ali facepalmed and groaned. "Sören, you're fucking terrible."

"*Takk.*"

It was also a good sign that he was joking like that. Ali booped his nose. "Kay, so tomorrow after twelve."

Sören nodded. Then he glanced towards the sliding glass doors and swallowed.

"What is it?" Ali asked, sensing a surge of anxiety.

"I... I don't like keeping things from Marcus and Nico, but." Sören bit his lip. "I haven't told them yet that I saw Ingmar. I've been shielding that information. I kind of... don't want to say anything yet, in case tomorrow goes badly -"

"I understand." Ali patted him.

Sören snorted. "I don't want Marcus to go over there and hurt him. And he would, if he thinks Ingmar broke my heart." Sören rolled his eyes.

The thought of Marcus going off on Ingmar, or anyone, sent a frisson through Ali. Marcus was a gentle giant with her and her kids, but there was something beneath the surface, volcanic in its intensity. Beautiful in its terror.

Dooku and Kenny came back out then to check on the skewers. "Is everything all right?"

Dooku called, seeming to sense Sören's tension.

Sören nodded. He deflected the probe with humor. "Jæja, Ali and I are making evil plans for world domination and all of that."

Ali snorted and bit back the response of *Is that what they're calling it now.*

Chapter 5

At twelve sharp, Ali arrived to pick up Sören in the Land Rover SUV she used for work. Though Sören liked to sleep in, he had been up since five that morning because of nerves, and even as he tried to calm his restless energy by walking Huan and blowing off some steam with video games, he was still on edge and that feeling only got stronger as they got closer.

"So," Ali said, "this is how we're doing this. I called Ingwion this morning and he had a request for me to go to the farmers' market, which makes my job of smuggling you in a little easier. I got a good haul of fresh fruit and veggies, and when I go on these runs I bring everything in with a wheelbarrow. So in a few minutes I'm gonna pull over, and you're gonna get in the wheelbarrow and then you'll have an uncomfortable rest of the trip with produce on top of you, and I need you to be as quiet as possible, but that's how we're getting in past the guards. They have metal detectors and you have piercings but it's easy enough to use the Force to disable the metal detectors temporarily."

Sören's laughter rang out. "This is probably one of the craziest fucking things I've ever done."

"Our entire life is fucking crazy, mate."

"That's true."

When they pulled over, Sören hopped out of the SUV, his breath in a gulp as Ali got out the wheelbarrow. Sören climbed in. With his height at six feet, it was a tight squeeze even though he had a lean build, and it was even worse when Ali began loading the produce on top of him. Ali arranged it in just a way where Sören could breathe, but barely. For not the first time, Sören was grateful that however Ingwion's gift of immortality had changed his physiology, it had taken away his asthma; he knew he'd be having an asthma attack right now otherwise.

It wasn't much farther to Ingwion's mansion but even a few minutes crammed in a wheelbarrow with produce piled on top of him was unbearable. And his anxiety made it harder to breathe, heart racing, stomach doing flip-flops. He hoped he wasn't shaking the produce in a noticeable way. To lighten the mood, Ali began humming the theme to *Mission: Impossible*, making Sören give a weak chuckle.

"You hanging in there, mate?"

"Mostly," Sören called back.

"Soon."

The worst part was yet to come. Sören felt the SUV pulling in. Ali slowed and finally stopped. Sören waited in the back, tense and terrified, and a moment later Ali came around. Getting the wheelbarrow out of the back of the SUV was a big drop and Sören fought back the "oof". Being flat on his back as Ali wheeled him along was intensifying his claustrophobia, but he kept still, and tried to be as quiet as possible. *Be brave for Ingwion. He needs you. You can do this.*

Sören heard Ali talk to the guards and then the wheelbarrow kept moving along. Sören heard doors open and Ali was still pulling him and pulling him. When the wheelbarrow

came to a stop, Ali muttered, "Just a minute here." Then Sören heard Ali say, "You need to step outside for some fresh air," and a female voice answer back, "I need to step outside for some fresh air." Footsteps walked off, and Sören heard Ali mumble, "Right," and now the produce started to come off him.

Ali worked quickly with unloading the wheelbarrow, and Sören saw Ali glance around every few seconds to make sure they weren't being watched. Sören looked up and around and saw they were in a spacious kitchen, even more extravagant than where he lived - everything done in cream and gold, walls, floors, countertops, appliances. *This is definitely Ingwion's place.*

Sören felt Ali's heightened Force senses - she was reaching out to feel if anyone was around, not just seeing. At last she made an "up" gesture and Sören sat up. Ali helped him out of the wheelbarrow. Sören saw the produce unloaded on the kitchen counter, and Ali gave him a little shove. "You better go to wherever it is you're going before one of the staff sees you."

Sören had to think fast. "Where's his bedroom?"

"Second floor, all the way down to the left."

Sören saw a small crate of strawberries on the counter and he found himself grabbing them, moving as quickly as he could. He had no idea where anything in Ingwion's house was but he let his Force senses guide him, and within minutes he came to a stairway. Making sure he wasn't seen, he ran up as quickly and silently as he could, and made his way down to the last room on the left.

Ingwion had a four-poster bed with a gauzy cream canopy curtain, sumptuous brocade duvet. A carved oak candelabra and gold-dusted off-white candles along the walls, frosted lanterns atop the oak dresser. What really stood out was a tub, made of ametrine. Sören let out a low whistle when he saw it. He loved gemstones, and seeing such a beautifully carved stone entranced him - he couldn't help but come closer, reaching out to run his hand around the edge of the tub, enjoying the smooth feel of it, studying the texture.

Sören sighed. He pulled back and headed towards the bed. He thought about stripping down and arranging strawberries on his naked body, but he stopped himself, since he didn't want to do anything sexual without consent, and he didn't know if Ingwion was in a place to want to have sex or not. And if he was rejected outright, he didn't want to just be tossed onto the street naked by security.

So he waited with the little crate of strawberries on his lap, and used the Force to sharpen his hearing. He could hear Ali's voice downstairs, but not be able to make out what she was saying, and then Ingwion's voice. They went back and forth, and at last Ali said, "Yes, I'll do that," and Ingwion said, "Thank you," and Sören realized their voices were closer to the stairwell. Sören heard footfall coming up the stairs and then down the hall and he braced himself, not breathing. Shaking.

Ingwion took one step in the bedroom and froze. In an instant, the glamour was gone and Sören saw the waist-length flood of golden hair, the pointy ears, the eyes like the sky reflected in pools, the full, sensuous mouth. Tall, lean, sculpted musculature with his black clothes fitting to him, showing the power of his physique. He was indescribably beautiful, almost too beautiful to look upon, and Sören's breath caught. But he was here on a mission, and he reminded himself of that.

"Ingwion." Sören swallowed hard. "Hi."

Ingwion's tone was neutral - neither angry nor happy. Flat. "What are you doing here."

"I... I came to see you."

"How did you get in here." Then Ingwion figured it out without being told. "Alinta -"

"She's my cousin, Ingwion." Sören swallowed again. "I asked her to bring me here -"

"You weren't even supposed to know that she works for me. She signed a non-disclosure agreement -"

"Do you honestly think she would have kept that info from me once I told her I know you? Because I was upset and she got that information out of me? Please, if you're pissed off that I'm here, don't take it out on her. But... Ingwion..." Sören shook his head, feeling a tight ache in his chest. "I needed to see you. I'm sorry, but no, I can't just forget about you. Do you honestly think I could? You know who I am, you know what I am. I don't forget about the people I love. I don't forget about my family, and you are my family since you gave me your blood."

"I told you to forget about me." Ingwion's expression was still neutral, his tone flat. "And I have no family anymore."

"Ingwion." Sören felt the hysteria rise in him, choking back a sob. Now that he was here, face to face with Ingwion, even though Ingwion had the mask of composure, Sören could see past it with the Force. He could *feel.* In his mind's eye, he saw the vision of the Dagorath that he'd had driving on the Ring Road, crashing his jeep. Fingolfin and Finarfin vaporized by dark lightning. Fëanor as a living supernova, become Death, destroyer of worlds. He remembered Floki's analogy of one domino toppling others... Ingwion knowing this was a harbinger of the Ragnarök.

Looking into a burning eye, the vortex of a storm. Ingwion was afraid of Odin. There was someone Ingwion had loved a long time ago – an Elven woman, one of his kinswomen, one of the Vanyar, a shieldmaiden – and Odin had taken her away. Taken her to his bed. Yet even after being left, feeling betrayed, Ingwion still loved her... and her service had catalyzed Ingwion's own, with Odin weaponizing those feelings. *If you do not want me to kill her, you will do as I say.* And so it was, strung along for thousands of years.

Freya, Sören realized.

Ingwion was afraid of Odin. And he was afraid of the Ragnarök.

Sören dared not look upon it too long, unsettled, and it was just as well, being drawn back to the abyss of Ingwion's grief, a cold void. The *aloneness* that Sören picked up on in the Force echoed and echoed, and Sören wished there was something, anything he could do to make it *stop*, to give his old lover some form of comfort, somehow.

"Ingwion." Sören blinked back tears, aching *so much* to try to help in some way, to try to ease Ingwion's pain. "I do. I love you. You are family *to me.* I know. *I know* about the Dagorath." Sören decided not to touch upon the betrayal he'd seen, whatever that silver-haired man had been. "I know you worry about what's going to happen at Ragnarök. But... I came here to your house because I want you to know you *are* loved and you have a place here with us if you want it. I care about you. I don't want you to feel so alone, so unloved. And I'd like to ease your pain, for at least a little while."

A long moment of silence hung between them, as if Ingwion was considering Sören's words, and Sören certainly hoped he was, because they were spoken from the heart. *Please. Please. Let me comfort you. Let me take you to a better place for a time.*

But then Ingwion turned away slightly. "You should go home."

"If you *truly* want me to, if you really and truly want me to just leave you alone, I will. But Ingwion, I remember what you were like before the Dagorath. I remember when we were in Iceland, and... I've missed your company. And I've missed the passion. How long has it been since someone's touched you? Since someone's given you pleasure? I know, believe me *I know*, that sex doesn't fix everything, it's not a cure for trauma, it's just a temporary pain relief. But even that is something. I hate to see you hurting so much like this. So cold, so dark." Sören heard his voice rising, despite himself, and Ingwion turned some more, and the tears at last spilled down Sören's cheeks. "Let me give you fire, Ingwion, at least a little bit, for a little while."

"There is no fire that can warm the Fimbulwinter."

"*Lies.*" The word came out with vehemence. Sören was angry now - not with Ingwion himself, but he seethed for what Odin had done to him, *hurt what is Mine* - the part of Sören that was still Fëanor was seething with rage at what had happened to his brothers' kin. "You would not have offered me your blood, close to two years ago, if you thought there was no chance. And you *do* need to be loved. You do need to know you are not alone." Sören tried to appeal to his sense of logic, then. "How is it that Maglor, who was without hope for so long after all that had happened to him, you dragged him back to me to try again, and yet you deny yourself hope, you deny yourself -"

"Because it is different."

And as much as Sören didn't want to go there, now he found himself going there, needing to touch that wound festering in Ingwion, the only way it could be cleansed with fire. "I know Freya betrayed you. But surely you must know that I will not -"

"Whether you will or won't doesn't matter anymore. There is nothing left for me."

Sören glared. "If you truly want me to go, I will. But the fact that you are even still trying to argue with me, tell me I'm wrong, means a part of you - for all your talk of having no hope, at least a small part of you hopes I'm right -"

And then, before Sören knew what was happening, Ingwion strode towards him, grabbed his face, and kissed him hard. Sören kissed back feverishly. *Yes. Hunger for this. Show me you are still alive, that there is still something there.* Sören shivered as the god's hands roamed over his T-shirt, thumbs rubbing the pierced nipples through the fabric. He thought about the night they'd first had sex in 2015, almost six years ago now. So much had changed since then. But not Sören's desire for him, cock rising with hot, urgent need.

With a teasing smile, Sören pulled one of the strawberries out of the crate he'd brought upstairs. "For old times' sake?"

Ingwion snatched the strawberry out of Sören's hand and flung it out of sight, yanked the crate of strawberries away from him and threw it across the room. Before Sören could protest Ingwion pounced on him like a cat, and tore Sören's shirt off, biting his neck with a growl. Sören moaned, and again as Ingwion began to undo his jeans, kissing and nibbling his neck, his throat.

"I missed you," Sören husked. "I missed this."

"Shut up," Ingwion rasped, and silenced Sören with another deep, fierce kiss, pushing him back against the pillows before he pulled off Sören's jeans.

–

Hours later they lay there side by side, spent. It was still surreal to Sören - he knew Ingwion was pent-up, and he wondered how long it had been for him. He matched hunger with hunger, all of the months of pining away, hoping to be reunited.

And yet, as good as the sex was, Sören still tingling and feeling floaty, he wasn't *just* here for sex. Sören liked sex, of course, but Ingwion wasn't a sex toy, he was a person. A very complicated person with a lot of issues, a history that went back eons. Just the brief glimpse he'd seen and felt of Ingwion's pain, Sören had responded, the Flame Imperishable within him wanting to take him out of the feeling of all destroyed, all gone, and *create*, to be the hearth fire welcoming him home, welcoming his kin to a new life.

Sören had offered his body for savage, rough fucking, wanting to give Ingwion the physical catharsis he needed... and now Sören offered it again, this time not for sex, not for release, but he reached out to hold Ingwion, wanting to offer some kind of comfort as well. Sören knew it wouldn't fix everything, but he knew that it was good to be held, be hugged. Sören wanted to be a living shield wall for the god who had loved and lost and felt like he could never trust again, nothing was ever really *safe*. Sören held out his arms and touched his lover's face gently, reverently, wanting Ingwion to feel the love in his touch. *Let me give you safe space for at least a few minutes. You need it.*

And Ingwion rolled away, turning his back. "Go away."

Sören sat there for a full minute, mouth open. Of course, he'd respect Ingwion's wishes. And of course, he knew what it was like to be upset and be in that place of *don't look at me, don't touch me*, refusing sympathy. But refusing to hug after sex, when they had cuddled after sex before the Dagorath - telling him to just get out like that - felt a little insulting. Sören tried not to take it personally, knowing from his own experience what it was like to be in pain and not think about or care about the consequences of one's words and actions. Still, his mind went back to 2015 when they had met at a club in Iceland - when Sören had been partying away his own grief at losing Maglor, and Ingwion was his first experience in years that hadn't been a quick fuck, meaningless. It was ironic that now Ingwion was treating him like all of those people who he'd just been a quick fuck to, and vice versa, using and used.

"Fine," Sören said, not able to keep the hurt out of his voice, angry with himself for letting him hear the wounded pride. "Be that way. I tried."

Sören's shirt had been ripped, so he couldn't put it back on, but he put everything else back on, and slung the ruined garment over his arm as he speed-dialed his cousin. "Ali?"

"Yeh, how did it go?"

"Get me the fuck out of here."

Chapter 6

Anthony hesitated outside the door, feeling a touch of apprehension. Even though he'd been invited to come over, he still felt like he was intruding somehow.

And of course, he knew why. He'd had a friendless youth, bullied by his peers - he'd fallen out of a tree when he was twelve after being chased up there by a gang of boys, and broke his femur; he still had a scar on his left thigh from the metal plate. In the Special Boat Service of the Royal Navy he'd had cordial relationships with his fellow officers, but he could never safely get past an arm's length. And it just intensified after he was recruited to MI6 after the SBS. Intimacy with people demanded honesty, and he wasn't in a line of work where he could just strike up a conversation with someone and open up about his life.

He'd started to get attached to his assignment, which was not something he'd bargained for, and not particularly prudent, but he couldn't help it nonetheless. And here he was, invited to his "unbirthday". It was the first time in years anyone other than his parents had cared about the fact that he'd had a birthday - it had been over a month ago, and Sören seemed genuinely sad that he hadn't been told.

So here he was, doing something that felt like *friendship*, and it was so strange. He'd been to interesting parts of the world, and this was such foreign terrain to him where it might as well have been on another planet.

Anthony rang the doorbell.

He was expecting Sören to answer the door, since Sören had been the one to invite him, but it was the tall elderly man, Dooku - *the silver fox*, as Anthony thought of him - to answer. "Greetings, Anthony. Please come in," Dooku said, that smooth velvet voice of his giving Anthony a little tingle of arousal.

Anthony strode in slowly, looking around. Something smelled delightful - that must be dinner. As if he knew Anthony was smelling it, Dooku said, "It will be a little while until dinner yet. Feel free to take a seat, may I offer you a refreshment? Tea?"

"Tea if you have it, yes." Anthony gave a small smile; Dooku was a fellow countryman after all. As Anthony took a seat, he noticed that it was just them in the living room, and the girls in their bassinettes. "Where's Sören?"

"He's in the backyard with the dog," Dooku said. "He'll be in shortly." Dooku gave a small, apologetic smile that seemed more of a frown.

Through his empathic gift, Anthony picked up the touch of worry in Dooku... and then he *felt* it, from the back yard. Strong signals of distress from Sören, anger and sadness and *hurt*. Anthony had a flash of a mental image of Sören crying.

"Is it all right if I go out there?" Anthony asked.

"Certainly. I can bring out the tea when it's ready."

Thank you." Anthony rose from the couch, and made his way to the sliding glass door that led out to the yard. He walked down the cobblestone path leading to the pool and the garden, and now he started to hear it. He paused, looking at Sören's back, watching him

throw a ball for Huan to fetch, Huan bringing it over and licking Sören's face, whining with sympathy, Sören tossing the ball out again, shoulders shaking. Anthony came closer and cleared his throat.

"Sören, hi."

"Hi," Sören said quietly.

Anthony came forward. Sören was trying to pull himself together but it was obvious he'd been crying. "Are you all right?" And then, a flare of protective anger. "You and Nicolaas didn't fight, did you?" While Sören was going by Stefan Kierkegaard in public, he'd requested to still be called Sören in private, at home, something Anthony understood - needing to preserve a sense of self after so much loss and upheaval. But Dooku had none of the same stipulations for Anthony, so his new first name of Nicolaas it was.

Sören shook his head. "No." He gave a bitter little laugh. "It would have been easier if that was what it was." Then Sören grimaced. "Sorry, you... you don't want to know."

"I do." Anthony took a seat next to him on the bench. He took the ball from Sören and threw it for Huan, amused by the hyper Corgi/sheepdog mix bounding after it. He gave Huan pettings when the dog returned, laughed softly as Huan licked his face, then Sören's, and tossed the ball out again. "I mean, if you're comfortable telling me. I won't pry." *His personal life is none of your business. You're already too attached, you're already on dangerous ground. Stop it.* And then Anthony argued with himself, *This may be relevant to my assignment. If he needs help...*

Sören shook his head and sighed. "It's complicated."

"Well... you realize what my job is. I can handle complicated."

"This is... quite a bit complicated." Sören looked down.

For the briefest instant, Anthony could feel past Sören's shielding to the sting of rejection, the feeling of *being used and discarded like a piece of trash* He wondered who - he didn't think it could possibly be Sören's partners, confirmed when Dooku interrupted by coming outside with hot tea for Anthony and iced tea for Sören - though Dooku and Anthony both made a face at the mere concept of putting ice in tea, Dooku nonetheless paused to affectionately tousle Sören's curls and put a hand on his shoulder before heading back inside.

Then, watching Sören frown into his iced tea, eyes impossibly sad, Anthony felt a flare of anger at whoever it was that made him feel this way. *I would treat you better than that.*

Then Anthony felt angry with himself for even thinking like that.*He is your assignment. You cannot get involved with him.*

Nonetheless, it was painful to see Sören so sad, his usually bubbly, goofy self so downtrodden. It was one thing to see him sad the last time he'd come over, but this was even worse, more intense than before. Anthony fought the urge to take Sören into his arms and just hold him, *offer myself*, but he needed to do something. He found himself reaching for his cell phone - he did tell Sören he was going to show him pictures of Theo.

"Would you like to see my cat?"

Sören perked up a bit and nodded.

Anthony accessed the gallery on his phone and for the next fifteen or twenty minutes Sören browsed pictures of Theo, including a couple short videos - including a video where it sounded like Theo, a very vocal Siamese, was warbling "Mah butt! Mah butthole! Hole! Butthole!" Sören laughed so hard he cried, leaning on Anthony's shoulder as he wheezed, doubling over.

"That's just wrong," Sören said.

"That's my cat." Anthony nodded, smiling.

"I love cats, and... he's adorable. I'd like to meet him sometime." Sören snickered. "Maybe he can tell me about his butthole in person."

Anthony facepalmed and laughed, showing Sören the wallpaper of Theo on his phone before he put it away. "Maybe." He was wary about bringing an assignment over his flat - as it was, he worried about the danger of bringing over the occasional one-night stand - but he was also lonely and the idea of having a friend over was appealing.

He realized that despite Sören professing to be a cat person, and his keen interest in the photos, Sören hadn't asked what the cat's name was, which spoke volumes to Anthony about just how addled Sören was in his upset. Just before Anthony could volunteer the cat's name, Dooku stepped out again. "Dinner's ready."

Anthony followed Sören inside - trying not to watch Sören's ass in those cargo shorts. Marcus, Ali, Kenny, and the kids were waiting at the table. Dooku had made Beef Wellington with *haricots verts*, and there was a frosted lemon cake for dessert.

Sören took a small box of tiny candles from the table, and instead of putting them in the cake, Sören put them in the Beef Wellington, making Dooku facepalm. "Well, it is his unbirthday," Sören said.

Anthony thought that was pretty funny, and Sören managed a grin as he struck a match to light the candles. For an instant Anthony wondered if Sören had pyrokinetic abilities. *But that's not in his file of known abilities, why would I be thinking that.* As Anthony took his seat, the group began to sing:

Happy unbirthday to you
Happy unbirthday to you
Happy unbirthday, dear Anthony
Happy unbirthday to you

"*And many mooooooooooooooooooore,*" Sören sang.

Anthony felt a strange frisson at that, not sure why, and then he blew out the candles. They were the trick candles that relit.

"Oh god." Marcus rolled his eyes. "Sören, just because you're the Flame Imp-" Then he stopped himself.

Anthony raised an eyebrow - he was *very* curious by what Marcus meant by that, what was at the end of the sentence, but it was clearly something Marcus wasn't comfortable saying in front of him. Anthony wondered if it was just a family nickname, an in-joke with complicated context, perhaps, or something more. He guessed it was more. But he wasn't going to press it.

Not yet.

The candles finally went out, and Dooku carved up the Beef Wellington and served it. "Thank you," Anthony said. "I appreciate the trouble -"

"We appreciate that you've been looking after us," Dooku said, and Sören nodded.

"You're good people," Anthony said, and he meant that sincerely. It had been a long time since he'd really felt welcomed anywhere, the way he'd been shown hospitality here. And then his eyes met Ali's across the table. "I'm sorry we got off on the wrong foot -"

"It's water under the bridge," Ali said.

"If it's any consolation to you..." Anthony couldn't help smiling as he remembered that last conversation with Letitia. "You earnt my respect. For someone with no military or espionage training, you managed to pull off quite a feat last year."

"Not just then, either," Sören blurted out, and then he covered his mouth, as if he'd said something he shouldn't have, and made a little squeak. He quickly began to shovel Beef Wellington in his mouth.

"Sören," Anthony said, feeling a touch of alarm, "you do realize that MI6 assigned me to keep you lot out of trouble? And I would rather not have to move in here and keep an even closer eye on you?" As soon as those words were out of his mouth, Anthony knew they were at least a little bit of a lie - the thought of living here with them made him wistful. But Anthony stared at Sören, feeling stern, wondering what Sören possibly meant by that slip of the tongue, because he definitely meant *something*.

"It's... nothing," Sören said.

"It's something," Anthony said, and cut his Beef Wellington, making it a point of stabbing in the knife to show he meant business. "And you're going to tell me."

"Not now."

"Later, then. Like after dinner."

"Sometime after dinner." Sören looked down reluctantly, and Ali chuckled, patting Sören's arm.

Dinner was delicious, and the cake was to die for. Anthony was once again touched that they'd done this for him, even moreso when Dooku put the remainder of the cake in a box for Anthony to take home.

Sören attended to the dishes, and Anthony hovered while Sören was doing them, making sure Sören understood they were going to have a talk and he wasn't getting out of it by making that puppydog face. Then he noticed Ali and Kenny were setting up Team Fortress 2, and as soon as the dishes were done, Kenny dragged Sören and Ali dragged Anthony. "Come on, let's play for a bit," Ali said.

Anthony was Spy again, and the urgency of finding out whatever possible trouble Ali and Sören had gotten into was offset by the trouble they got into in the game, Sören and Ali going wild as Pyro and Demoman. As upset as Sören had been earlier, Anthony couldn't begrudge seeing him have fun, giggling maniacally as his Pyro set things on fire and

activated the Balloonicorn. Anthony himself had fun - it was a nice change of pace from being "on" as part of Britain's intelligence apparatus, to being Spy in the game, backstabbing the enemy. For at least a little while, he forgot about the impending serious conversation.

I could get used to this.

At last Huan came over, whining. "Ah shit, he needs to go out," Sören said. He gave Anthony a look. "Do you want to come with me on walkies?"

And so it was that Anthony Hewlett-Johnson went on "walkies" with a paranormal he was ridiculously attracted to, in the dusk of twilight. For the first few minutes silence hung between them, as if Sören was trying to figure out what to say, and how to say it. Finally Anthony said, "Whatever it is you and Ali did, I need to know the full, honest truth, even if you're not in trouble or you *think* you're not. I can't help you if I don't know what's going on, and you had best hope I can help if MI6 catches wind of whatever it was."

"OK." Sören took a deep breath. "This ties into why I was upset earlier."

"Ah." Anthony braced himself.

"I'm just gonna come out and say it. Ingmar Borovkov and I have a history, and I hadn't known he was out here, then I found that out recently and... Ali took me to see him. Since he doesn't do visitors, she smuggled me into his mansion. I know that sounds, ah, stalker-ish, but he was gone for a long time and he's not OK since he came back so I needed..." Sören's voice trailed off.

Anthony facepalmed. "*Jesus*, Sören..." He really didn't want to hear the end of it from his department head, or Ingmar himself - he'd only been in contact with the man a small handful of times since he'd been recruited into MI6 in 2015, but the man had left an impression, including and especially that he was in fact not a man, and not someone to get on the wrong side of. "That's even worse than I thought. You know he can have my arse -"

"I... I didn't realize."

"Yeah, you should have, because if you have a history with Ingmar Borovkov, you're probably aware of the special relationship he has with my department."

"I am," Sören said. "He set up Letitia as our point of contact before... well, before Ali happened."

"Please tell me that for the love of *Christ*, Ali didn't tase him, or anybody."

Sören chuckled. "I doubt Ali would be able to tase him, or that it would even have an effect. But no, no tasing was involved. Just..." Sören snickered again. "A wheelbarrow. And produce."

"Kinky."

Sören lost it, howling with laughter. Anthony chuckled too - it felt good to make Sören laugh like that, and god, he loved the way Sören laughed, loved the way his laughter seemed to light up the entire world. But then Anthony quickly sobered. "I'm really surprised I haven't heard an earful yet."

"Probably because it's, well... personal... and he may not want MI6 to hear about the particulars of his sex life." Then Sören swallowed hard. "Er, TMI, sorry."

"Sören, I'm an adult, and a gay man besides. It's not TMI." Though it was a prickle of jealousy, and Anthony hated that he was feeling that way. He now had context for why Sören was crying earlier, and he found himself angry at Ingmar Borovkov, the not-man who had it all, treating Sören like garbage. Anthony grasped at levity. "Unless you start going into graphic detail about what you guys did with the produce and the wheelbarrow -"

"Oh god, no." Sören snorted. "That was all Ali, anyway. It was a Trojan Horse to get me past the guards."

"*Jesus.*" Anthony was amused and horrified all at once, and felt a touch of admiration for Sören's cousin. "Does she want a job with us?" He was only half-joking; the department could use someone like her.

When they stopped laughing, Sören was sad again. "Anyway... it won't happen again. I think he and I are done." Sören nodded to himself, and there was a faraway, hurt look in his eye.

"I'm sorry."

"Shit happens." Sören shrugged.

But Anthony knew even though Sören was trying to be nonchalant about it, he really wasn't. He could feel it again, Sören's shielding lowering for just an instant, that he had loved someone intensely and lost. No one had ever loved Anthony the way Sören loved this Ingmar Borovkov, and Anthony *hated* his "employer" for it.

And Anthony felt bad for Sören. Even without being at least a little infatuated with him, Anthony genuinely *liked* him and he didn't like seeing Sören hurt like this. Without thinking about it, just feeling, Anthony found himself reaching out for Sören, putting his arms around the younger man.

It was crossing a line, much more personal than he should be getting with his assignment, but he'd already crossed a line coming over for his "unbirthday". And even as it was wrong to do this, it felt *right*. Sören felt good in his arms.

I could get used to this, too.

Sören sighed softly and rested his head on Anthony's shoulder, returning the hug. Anthony resisted the urge to pet his curls, knowing that was a slippery slope. But he could smell them, the lavender-rose shampoo Sören used, and beneath that, the sort of floral-spice-woodsmoke-musk of his skin. He *wanted*, and it was dangerous to want. This was definitely crossing a line. But he didn't know what else to do. And Sören was accepting the hug, just resting there in his arms for a moment, just being. Anthony could feel Sören's relief, a brief comfort, and he couldn't deny him.

When they pulled apart, looking into each other's eyes, Anthony felt tongue-tied. He'd been suave enough to bring home any number of men cruising over the years, and he could barely string two words together now, heart racing, stomach fluttering. He felt like a stupid teenager with a crush, looking into those soulful brown eyes, feeling the lingering natural body heat of Sören on his skin.

But then Sören spoke, easing that tension of *what to say, what to do.* "Thank you."

"You're welcome."

"I'm sorry I may have put you in a difficult position with Ingmar. I hope he doesn't give you hell -"

"Well if he does... we'll deal with it. Honestly, my main concern right now is making sure *you're* OK." Anthony knew about Sören's mental health history, including the attempted suicide years ago, and he didn't want to see Sören fall apart, not just professionally, but personally.

"Jæja, I've survived worse."

That answer somehow made it even worse. *You poor kid.* Anthony felt stupid about thinking of Sören as a kid, he wasn't *that* much younger, and there was also something about Sören that felt much older, for some reason. But here and now he was vulnerable, and Anthony felt protective.

"If you need an ear, a shoulder... I'm here for you."

"*Takk.*"

They resumed walking, resumed the silence. Sören looked up at the stars, and Anthony could once again feel past his shielding, could feel Sören thinking of his lost brother Dag. Anthony remembered that brief encounter with Dag in London in 2001, having no idea back then that someday his path would cross with that boy's brother. He felt bad for whatever had happened to Dag, with MI6 all but writing it off as a lost cause now - still searching, but the trail was colder and colder all the time.

I've lost too much, Sören broadcasted. *What is the fucking point of eternity when -*

Anthony felt Sören try to push himself out of that dark place in his head, and Sören gave a little awkward clear of the throat. "I like it when you come over," Sören said.

"I like it when you have me over."

"Um..."

For a minute Anthony wondered if Sören was going to ask him out on a date, and Anthony knew that, professionalism be damned, he'd say yes, and he wanted to kick himself for that. But thankfully, that wasn't what Sören came back with. "Would you like to start coming over for Sunday dinner with the family?" Sören asked, biting his lip, shifting his weight from one foot to the other.

"I don't want to impose -"

"If I thought you were imposing, I wouldn't ask. Actually, Nico brought it up a few hours ago, before you came over." *Before I got reminded of Ingmar and started crying again,* Sören broadcasted.

Crossing a line, Anthony's mind cautioned, but Anthony nodded and said, "All right. I appreciate it, Sören. It'll be nice to have a home-cooked meal." He chuckled wryly. "I'm not much of a cook."

"Well, Nico likes to feed people, so you're in luck."

They walked back to the house, and after Sören brought Huan inside he walked Anthony out to the carport. They lingered, and now it was Sören's turn to initiate the hug. Anthony felt like he was going to melt to Sören's touch, the feeling of Sören's breath on his skin, the lithe body, the warmth of him. His cock was starting to rise. *Fuck.*

"Thank you for coming," Sören said.

I will later. Anthony fought back a facepalm, hoping Sören didn't pick up on that. "So I'll see you on Sunday? Same time?"

Sören nodded. "And a mid-week check-in, maybe?"

"Yes, I'll call before I come over." Anthony let go of Sören - reluctantly - and patted his shoulder. "Night, Sören. Sleep well, when you get there."

"Night. Sweet dreams."

They will be if you're in them.

And when Anthony drove away, face burning, he made a noise, hoping he wouldn't go even further over the line. He could *not.*

Chapter 7

You're fired.

Though Sören had been tight-lipped about what exactly had happened with him and Ingmar, the "get me the fuck out of here" told Ali it hadn't gone well. And over the weekend following Sören's encounter with Ingmar, Ali knew she might be out of a job come Monday. Sure enough, she showed up at Ingmar's mansion on the morning of Monday, April fifth to be told just that.

But it still felt like an anvil being dropped on her life. Ali was angry with herself for suggesting it - she wasn't angry with Sören, really, who got a raw deal - but she was even angrier with Ingmar Borovkov, since he'd hired her precisely because she'd done something outrageous and that sort of willingness to take risks and go above and beyond, was the sort of thing he needed with a personal assistant. Ali had hoped that Ingmar would understand that she was trying to do right not just by Sören, but by *him too* - though their relationship was strictly professional, Ali could sense Ingmar was wounded in some way, and Ali's instinct was that when people in her life were hurting, she needed to fix it somehow.

He hadn't seen it that way. And now she wasn't just out of a job, but since her job was paying for the house where she lived with Kenny and the twins, she was going to have to find a new place to live. Moving *and* trying to find a new job after she'd been sacked, which would hurt her chances of employment in Sydney... that was more than she wanted to deal with right now.

So Ali was on a drive. Just driving, not really going anywhere. Driving around Sydney, windows down, music blasting. Ingmar had at least let her keep the Land Rover SUV she'd been using for work, which would help with hauling her kids around.

Or if we have to live in it.

Ali knew that was ridiculous - she knew neither Sören nor her parents would let her be out on the street. But she still felt pessimistic... as if this incident weren't an end in and of itself, but a harbinger of a greater doom to come.

A shiver went through her.

Ali's cell phone started going off. The ringtone was "Loser" by Beck, which she'd affectionately gotten for Kenny. She pulled over to take the call.

"Hey," Ali said.

"Hi. You're not OK, I can feel it."

Ali wasn't going to lie to him. "I'm not OK, no."

"Are you doing something work-related? Can you come home?"

"I'll come home," Ali said, not wanting to drop the bomb over the phone.

"Fuck. Jesus."

"Yeh." Ali sighed and sipped her tea. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't have smuggled Sören in there. I should have thought more about the potential consequences -"

"Well, it's like you said. You got hired on the sole basis of being willing to go to extreme lengths to follow your conscience, and you pointed out to the guy that you were following your conscience again. And you did promise you wouldn't do something like that again."

"Still, though. This puts us in a bit of a bind."

"Well, we can start looking for new places, and new jobs later, when we've calmed down."

"You say we..." Ali cocked her head to one side. "I don't expect you to try to job-hunt for me. This is my mistake -"

"I mean for myself, too." Kenny frowned. "Like, as much as I love photography and it's great when the occasional piece of mine gets picked up in a magazine or on a blog and I get paid... it's happening less and less. What was sustainable ten years ago isn't so much now that stock photography is more in use and people pirate shit - I look up my stuff on Google Images from time to time and I see lots of unauthorized copies circulating that I'm not getting paid for. I feel like I need to find more steady work instead of you being the breadwinner while I cling to my dream."

"It still fucking sucks," Ali said, scowling. "Your photography job is how we*met.*" Ali felt a twinge of nostalgia, remembering when Kenny went on her outback tours. Falling in love with him.

"It can be a hobby now. It's... I'll deal."

Ali rubbed her face and gave Kenny a look. Then she leaned back in her chair. "I'm sorry. This entire situation..."

Kenny rubbed Ali's knee. "We'll get through it. Maybe it's a blessing in disguise." Kenny pursed his lips. "I mean, it already kind of is. Even though you're home more than when you were driving your rig, you're also getting called out at weird hours, and sleeping at odd times to compensate. Might be nice to have a normal schedule again."

Ali snorted. "What even is normal."

"Right, don't ask me." Kenny used the Force to put his glass of lemonade down on the coffee table. He looked at his watch then. "Let's go pick up the kids and take them to their piano lesson."

Even though Megadeth and Metallica were only six, they were Force sensitive and observant, and could tell something was troubling their parents when they got in the SUV. Ali didn't want to alarm them, so she stopped on the way to her cousin's mansion to get ice cream for everyone. The ice cream parlor was a short distance from Sydney Harbour, and for a little while they just looked out at the Harbour and the Opera House, eating ice cream and enjoying the view, and Ali tried to get her nerves under control. But it was something that not even ice cream and the seascape could fix.

When they arrived at the mansion, Dooku was at his restaurant and Marcus was just

getting back from his record shop, waving at them in the carport. He walked with them to the mansion, and when they got in Marcus called out, "Sören?" Then after a minute he said "Ah," as if he had sensed him, and made a beeline for the glass patio doors.

Ali saw Sören in the pool, Huan paddling with him. Ali laughed at the comical sight of it, and when Kenny and the kids saw it they laughed too. Sören's daughters were sitting nearby in a stroller in the shade and Kate gave a little wave; Ali waved back.

"Mum, can we go for a swim?" Metallica asked, and Megadeth chimed in, "Pleeeeeeeeeease?"

"Oh, I don't see why not," Ali said. "I'm sure Marcus wants to unwind a little before your lesson."

Marcus nodded. "Ja, that's fine with me."

Ali gave him a look, hoping to convey the message of*you know I know you're not German*, but she wasn't going to push it. Not now, anyway.

Because of how frequently they visited, the kids had spare swim trunks in the hall closet, and they ran off to get changed while Marcus made tea. Ali and Kenny watched the kids run out to the yard to join Sören in the pool, and soon enough Ali heard the sounds of splashing, shrieking and giggling, and she felt herself smile a real smile for the first time all day.

"You look like hells," Marcus said, raising an eyebrow. "No offense, but -"

"No, I feel it." Ali pursed her lips, and Kenny put an arm around her, gently rubbing a shoulder.

"May I ask what happened?" Marcus leaned in slightly. "You can tell me to piss off if I'm being too pushy, but you are family..."

"It's fine." Ali took a deep breath and looked at Kenny, who nodded. "I lost my job."

"Sören told me that 'Joe Friday' is Ingmar Borovkov," Marcus said. "I assume you know I know him."

"Sören told me, yeh," Ali said. "He didn't get into too much detail, said you guys have... a history. And he does too."

"And he fired you."

"For bringing Sören over." Ali shrugged. "I suppose I was out of line, but -"

Marcus pinched the bridge of his nose. "No, Sören loved him. Still loves him, I think - I know he doesn't just get over people so easily." Then Marcus muttered under his breath, "I warned him."

"Who, Sören?"

"No. *Ingmar.*" Marcus's eyes flashed and for a minute they seemed almost not-human, that labradorite iridescence again, before they went back to silver-grey behind his glasses. "I told Ingmar back in summer 2019 that Sören is not shallow, he's at least a little in love with the people he sleeps with. Ingmar insisted he meant nothing to Sören. Idiot."

"He feels things deeply," Ali said, nodding. "Seems to be a common affliction in our family." She frowned, thinking of being made fun of in her younger years about being "too sensitive". When she got older, she went from crying over spilled milk to getting angry, exploding with rage. She learned how to keep it under control, mostly - the same could not be said for her brothers - but she took things hard, and she tended to stew and seethe until she boiled over.

"You have no idea," Marcus muttered under his breath, and then he said in his normal tone of voice, "So he not only used Sören and tossed him aside like a dirty rag, but then he fired you."

Ali nodded solemnly.

"I'm of a mind," Marcus said, "to go over to wherever it is he's living and have a few words with him."

"Oh no." Ali shook her head. "I don't want you to get into a fight with him and... and... the police being brought out and..."

"Oh trust me," Marcus said, a humorless smile on his face, "the police wouldn't get involved."

Sören chose that moment to come in, toweling off, wheeling in a stroller with the baby girls. "What's happening with the police?"

"Nothing," Marcus said.

Sören put his hands on his hips. Metallica and Megadeth followed him inside, and Sören led them to the fridge, getting lemonade for everyone. "It's something."

"I'll tell you in a minute," Ali said. Then she narrowed her eyes at Marcus. "I don't want to have this discussion in front of the kids, if -"

"I understand." Marcus got up from the chair and said, "I'll be in the piano room when you're ready, *Kinder.*"

When the kids had gotten changed again and went off to see Marcus for their piano lessons, Sören raised his eyebrows at Ali and folded his arms. "What's going on?"

"Ingmar fired me," Ali said.

Sören's jaw dropped. "He what."

"He fired me."

"I..." Sören blinked, and then he looked as if someone had slapped him and his jaw trembled, eyes welling up. "Oh shit. I'm sorry. This is all my fault -"

"No. It's my fault for bringing you -"

"Which you wouldn't have done if I hadn't told you -"

"No, Sören, don't blame yourself for this. Besides..." Ali shook her head. "He knew what I was like going into this so I don't know what he would have expected, once I inevitably

found out you're my cousin and inevitably found out you two had a thing. He's just being... well, never mind."

Sören's nostrils flared. "Yeah, never mind." He glowered. "That's bloody awful. What... what's going to happen now?"

Ali and Kenny looked at each other, then back at Sören. "Well," Ali said, "we'll need to find jobs, and we'll very likely need to move out of where we've been living because the kind of jobs available - especially whatever I could get after my last employer fired me - aren't really gonna pay rent. It's still early in the month and we'll have all month to be out of there, but April is a short month and -"

"I'll talk to the guys about it, but consider yourselves welcome to stay with us," Sören said.

Ali wasn't entirely surprised Sören would offer this - he was family, and if the situation was reversed she'd do the same for him, but nonetheless, she felt a little self-conscious about it. "Are you sure? We don't want to cramp your style -"

"*Ali.* You've seen the fucking size of this place, right? We have more than enough room for you two and the kids. And it's not like we're hurting for money so as far as I'm concerned you guys can stay here rent-free."

"I really, really don't want to... like... freeload..." Ali's eyes misted, touched by the generosity, and feeling *angry* that her kinsman had been kept away from her for so long. She had a fierce ache for what could have been, if she and Sören had met each other years ago.

"You're not," Sören said. "I don't see it that way. I mean, again, I'll have to talk to Nico and Mag - Marcus, but I don't think it'll be a problem."

"I mean, just till we get on our feet -"

Sören shook his head. "The offer is permanent if you want it. To be honest, and Anthony would probably agree with me..." Ali noticed the way Sören's cheeks turned a little pink, the sparkle in his eye when he mentioned the MI6 agent's name. "There's safety in numbers. After what happened with Dag, I'd feel better, personally, if we were all under one roof as much as possible. And I think it would be better for the kids, too - your kids, my kids when they get a little older. As a wise man once said, it takes the entire Village People to raise a child." Sören smiled at his own joke, but then he was serious again, and Ali knew he was thinking about Ingmar and having unpleasant feelings.

Ali and Kenny looked at each other. "I don't want to impose either," Kenny said, "or come off like taking advantage -"

"Again, *you're not.* I mean, I won't say no to you getting a job*if you want something to do*, because, like, well, you see Nico's restaurant and Marcus's record shop. I don't really do anything..." Sören had a touch of bitterness in his voice, and then he swallowed it. Across their bond, Ali saw the mental image of Sören having an art studio and closing it, and she could feel the pain and regret. "But I'm not going to stand in your way and tell you *no, don't do anything with your life* if you really and truly want to work. Just the same, though, I don't care if you don't and you just want to hang here at home with me. I'll keep saying it till it gets through your head - I wouldn't offer if I wasn't serious."

"We'll think about it," Ali said, and Kenny nodded, though she was leaning towards yes and she knew Kenny was, too. It would be much less stress to move here instead of

finding a new place entirely, and worry about how to make rent there. Ali didn't know what she and Kenny would do about employment, if it was strictly optional, though Ali didn't feel right not doing something with herself either, if only because it was a matter of pride for her, and needing to keep busy *and out of trouble.* Then again, she had been busy and gotten into plenty of trouble already, and something told her trouble wasn't completely over yet.

"Great," Sören said. "Do you guys want to spend the night here so you can get a feel for what it would be like living here? We're roughly the same height and I don't mind letting you borrow my pajamas or something to sleep in, and the kids can borrow T-shirts or whatever."

Ali looked at Kenny, who nodded. "That makes sense to me," Kenny said.

Ali also nodded. "And dinner with the fam would be a nice distraction." Even as things already seemed to be working out for the better, Ali was still upset, now more for Sören than herself, feeling him broadcast *this is my fault, I fucked up, I failed, I can't do anything right...*

Ali couldn't take it. She got up, went over to her cousin, pulled him off his seat, and took him into her arms, into a fierce, tight hug. After a minute she pulled back slightly, put her hands on his shoulders, and looked into his eyes. "Now you listen to me," she said. "*I do not blame you for this.* OK?"

"I blame myself -"

"*Don't.*" Ali shook her head firmly. "And maybe if he didn't treat you like a piece of*shit*, none of this would have happened."

"I hate to say it," Kenny said, "but you're better off without that guy. He sounds like a douche."

Ali cackled. "Stay classy, Kenny."

"Pardon me..." Kenny's voice dropped an octave. "A*douchebag.*"

Sören gave him a stern look - Ali could feel him broadcasting *I happened to love that douchebag* - but then Sören started shaking with silent laughter. Ali slapped him on the back.

"And I'm serious," Ali said, now giving Sören a stern look herself as Sören sat back down; Huan got up on Sören and began to lick his face, and the cats were hovering with concerned chirps. "I do not want you blaming yourself and getting down on yourself and getting all... fucking mopey... about this." In her mind's eye she could see Sören back in Iceland, wrapped up in a blanket, staring off into space, looking absolutely devastated. "I would do it for you again, if I'd thought it would fix things, and clearly it didn't, but we didn't know until we took that chance." Ali sat back down and folded her arms. "There is nothing I would not do for my family, Sören Sigurðsson. *Nothing.* Remember that."

Sören nodded slowly. "I'll try."

—

She is in the body not her own again, pale, male, long copper-red hair. Only one hand.

"She has survived. She has it. We must find her."

She watches herself, as the tall redheaded man clad in armor, lead forth an army. She sees the slaughter, the massacre. She herself kills many, consumed with battle-madness - and the madness of grief for the father she has lost. What she is pursuing, what this woman has, is all she has left of him - that and her oath. And it is her oath to reclaim what was stolen, even if it means others will die.

Especially if it means others will die.

Marcus is fighting with her, magnificent in his own rage... and terrible. She watches him kill, as she herself is killing. They kill and kill together, no mercy, no quarter, no remorse.

Until later, when two children are spared, and she has to look them in the eye.*What have I done?* And the horrible knowledge, *I would do it again.*

The two boys are her responsibility now, she feels a debt to them for what was done. She and Marcus talk about how they're going to do this, how they're going to take care of them. The boys cry in the middle of the night and she goes to try to comfort them; Marcus sings them back to sleep. And then Marcus holds her and she is falling apart in his arms, all the whys and what could have beens. This was not the life she ever saw for herself.

"My oath," she screams, beating him with her one fist and the stump of her handless arm. He lets her hit him, as if it is a sort of penance. "My oath. *My oath!*"

_

"*My oath!* MY OATH!"

Ali sat up with a start, heart pounding, ears ringing. Kenny made a noise and sat up with her.

"That dream again?" Kenny raised an eyebrow.

Ali facepalmed. "It was worse this time." *You were dead.*

Kenny put an arm around her, and Ali found herself grateful that they were staying in the far end of the mansion, hoping that nobody heard her screaming like that, not just the kids, but she didn't want Sören, Marcus or Dooku to hear that either. *I don't want them thinking they're about to live with someone unstable.* Sören hadn't talked to his menfolk yet - Ali knew that conversation would happen when they went back to the house tomorrow - and she worried briefly that Sören would decide his offer was off the table. Of course she knew better than that, and she knew Sören had PTSD and would likely understand about being plagued by nightmares, *except these aren't nightmares of anything I've lived here.*

It felt so real. Ali shuddered, and had to reflexively look down to make sure she had both hands and they weren't covered in blood.

Chapter 8

Close to three weeks later, on the night of Friday, April twenty-third, it was the night before the move of Ali, Kenny, Metallica and Megadeth would be complete. Dooku and Maglor had agreed to them moving in without hesitation, but it had taken the better part of three weeks for Ali and Kenny to figure out what they were taking and what was not coming with them and what to do with it, and pack their belongings with Sören's occasional help. They had been moving their things over in stages, and tomorrow Ali and Kenny would have the utilities shut off at their place before coming home for good.

But tonight Ali, Kenny, and their kids were staying at the mansion. They still hadn't fully unpacked yet, and it would be awhile after that for them to be settled, decorating their rooms how they liked. It still felt like they'd come home, and Dooku had a dinner in celebration - one that Anthony was invited to, even though he usually came on Sundays. Frankie and Margrét had also been invited, and though Sören felt awkward about it, he had invited their partner Flóki - now known to Sören, Dooku, and Maglor as Loki the Norse god, the former Balrog. Though Flóki was a close associate of Ingwion's, Sören didn't assume they were a two-headed monster who shared all the same opinions, and Sören certainly wasn't going to hold any of this past month's unpleasantness with Ingwion against him.

Sören was disappointed to see that Flóki was not with Frankie and Margrét when they arrived, bringing a potato salad and Icelandic shrimp salad for potluck. "Where's Flóki?" Sören asked.

Margrét pursed her lips and shook her head. "He said he had things to do."

Like avoid me, apparently. Sören sighed and took the shrimp salad from his sister, but before he could carry it off to the kitchen, Margrét pulled him into a hug.

Margrét was older by three years. She had been born Magnús, and started transitioning in 2007. Margrét had an Adam's apple and was over six feet tall, but otherwise looked very feminine - she had spent time in Japan years ago and favored the Elegant Gothic Lolita style of dress, today wearing a black lace cocktail dress with a sparkly black fascinator atop her hair. She had a septum ring in her nose and several pairs of small silver earrings in her ears, including a triple helix piercing. Back in Iceland her hair had been dark like her brothers, to her waist in loose curls. Since the move to Australia and the necessity to hide from whoever had taken Dag, Margrét had started dyeing her hair, and currently it was a shade of deep plum, with lighter purple streaks. Her grey eyes were carefully made up and she wore a touch of lipstick.

Frankie was an interesting contrast - a foot shorter than Margrét, heavyset, large-breasted. She had a flaming red pixie cut and grey-blue eyes behind glasses, a nose ring and eyebrow ring, a sweet doll face with dimples, no makeup. She was wearing a Sex Pistols T-shirt today with jean shorts, and the tattoos on her arms and legs were visible, flowering vines that Sören knew led to a Tree of Life on her back. Frankie joined in to make it a group hug, and Sören affectionately tousled her hair. Frankie was several months pregnant with his child, expecting in July - Margrét had her "original plumbing", as she called it, but also had a vasectomy years ago where Sören had accompanied her to the clinic for moral support, and though there were stories in myth of gods impregnating mortals, Flóki claimed he "shot blanks", having used magic to make himself infertile after “the Sleipnir incident”. Sören had not been planning on becoming a biological parent, it was the shock of his life, but it was one he had been preparing for since he found out at

Christmas, nervous and excited all at once. Frankie had that healthy glow of pregnancy and Sören booped her nose, smiling fondly.

Frankie nuzzled his hand and gave it a tender little kiss. Then she spoke directly into his mind with the Force. *It's probably not you. He hasn't been around much lately at all. Says he's been doing stuff.*

What kind of stuff? Sören was curious.

Frankie gave a small shrug. *Dunno.*

For some reason, this put Sören a bit more on edge than if Flóki had said outright it was because of avoiding him; the fact that Flóki hadn't been around much lately "doing stuff" was a little worrisome on its own, but something about that in tandem with Ingwion seeming to want nothing to do with Sören anymore felt downright alarming.

Sören nonetheless tried to keep the appearance of good cheer, not wanting to ruin Ali and Kenny's "welcome home" party, as he led his sister and the lover they shared into the kitchen. Ali got up and hugged each of them warmly, and they patted Kenny on their way to their seats.

Sören sat down between Dooku and Anthony; Maglor was sitting between Dooku and Ali. Sören used the Force to pour lemonade from the pitcher in the middle of the table, not caring if Anthony saw since it was literally his job to know about people like him. Some used the Force to serve themselves, some did it manually even though they were capable of Force use. Sören decided to be polite and wait on Anthony since he was a guest, and Anthony watched as Sören used the Force to fill his plate.

"So, how's the move going?" Margrét asked in her smoky contralto.

"Pretty good," Ali said, nodding. "We just have the utilities turned off tomorrow and then... we're all in. No looking back."

"We would have brought you a housewarming present," Margrét said, making an apologetic little moue, "but I have no idea what your taste is..."

"It's all right." Ali patted her across the table. "Decorating is a lower priority for us. It'll happen eventually, but..."

Metallica looked noticeably disappointed, and Ali glanced over and ruffled her hair. "Oh, peanut," she said. "I know." She explained to everyone else, "They had quite the setup at our old place. Glow in the dark stars, fairy lights, wall stickers."

"Yeah, the new room is boring," Metallica said.

"Metallica Dio Kim-Jonsson, that is *rude.*"

"But you told me to tell the truth -"

"There's a time and a place." Ali shot her daughter a look.

Sören tried not to laugh, and he could tell Anthony was also trying not to laugh, and he heard Anthony broadcast *Metallica* Dio, *seriously?* before his mental shielding went back up. Ali saw Sören fighting off snickers and kicked him under the table and Sören gave a lazy grin before he shoveled a mouthful of potato salad. "We could work on the room

being less boring this weekend," Sören said, "you know, if that's OK."

"I'm exhausted from running around all week," Ali said.

"Well by 'we' I didn't necessarily mean you," Sören said. "I could do it, and... and... maybe Marcus or Nico could help..."

"I have long shifts at the restaurant this weekend," Dooku said. "My apologies."

"I can help," Maglor said, "but I'm not artsy the way you are."

"I could do something," Anthony volunteered.

Sören was surprised, and secretly thrilled at the chance to spend more time with him.*Cut that shit out.* "Really? I mean, you don't have to -"

"No, I... I want to." Anthony looked a little sheepish. "You all have been so kind, I feel..." His voice trailed off and he shifted in his chair a little.

Sören restrained the urge to hug him.

"But I need to know what needs to be done," Anthony said. "Give me a job, and I'll do it."

Sören's mind went immediately into the gutter, thinking about giving Anthony a blowjob, and he shoved that mental image away as quickly as possible before another Force sensitive saw it. "I was thinking we could paint the room, so we'd be putting the kids in the other-other guest room while we get everything set up, but with two sets of hands on dick - er, on deck." *Great, I've got Anthony's dick on the brain.*"We should be able to get the room painted this weekend. Maybe I could even work on a mural."

"OK," Anthony said.

Sören turned to him then. "You ever painted a room before? You're gonna need to wear old, kinda ratty clothes -"

Anthony chuckled and rolled his eyes. "I was in the service, Sören, I am aware of the fact that when you do certain jobs you dress down. I'll find something."

"OK. Didn't mean to be rude." The fact was Anthony always looked so put together that Sören didn't think he owned anything suitable to get paint-splattered, but then, Sören didn't know.

Maglor raised his eyebrows and said nothing, just sipped iced tea.

"*Would* you kids like a mural in your room?" Sören asked, and then, not knowing if they knew what that word was or not, explained, "A picture on the wall, like your wall stickers, but I paint it."

Metallica and Megadeth nodded vehemently. "Yes please," Megadeth said, and Metallica said, "Please please."

"OK, at least they have *some* manners," Ali muttered.

Sören grinned. "Any ideas?"

"I want a unicorn," Metallica said.

"Yeah! A unicorn! Farting rainbows!" Megadeth yelled.

Ali facepalmed; Kenny chuckled and Sören snorted. Anthony got a *what have I gotten myself into* look on his face and Sören patted him without thinking about it. "Anything else?" Sören asked.

"Bunnies," Metallica said.

"And cats." Megadeth nodded.

"What color do you want your room?" Sören asked.

"Purple." Megadeth pointed at Margrét's hair. Margrét's face lit up. "Like the stripes."

"Yeah!" Metallica said. "Her hair is cool. I want hair like that when I grow up."

"Awwww, *takk*," Margrét said.

"I agree," Sören said.

"What, you want hair like that when you grow up, too?" Margrét teased.

Sören rolled his eyes, then he proved her point by loudly blowing bubbles into his lemonade with a straw. "Maybe," he said. "Just streaks, though, not the whole thing purple."

"You might look good with a touch of teal or blue, even," Frankie said, and Margrét nodded.

"Yeah, blue is my favorite color," Sören said, a distant memory in his mind's eye. *Fingolfin's eyes.*

Then Sören quickly pushed that away - he had a lot of mixed feelings about the past, more bitter than sweet, and he didn't want to be in a bad mood right now, especially with speculating about Flóki's absence. "OK, purple room, unicorn, bunnies, cats, I think I can manage that."

And he found that he felt just as excited as the kids did - he hadn't painted since the move from Iceland to Australia, not since he'd been told he had a very distinctive style and it would be easy for people looking for him to find him through new art. This wasn't quite the sort of art that he used to do but it was still *something*, and it was something that would make his cousin's kids happy. He too felt like a big kid getting hyper about it, determined to make it the best mural *ever*.

Sören's eyes met Dooku's, and Dooku gave him a little smile, and Sören saw a touch of wistfulness in his dark eyes. Across their bond Sören saw and felt it - years ago when they were both in London, and Sören had painted Dooku's meditation room, a theme of space with nebulas. That house - that life - was long gone now, and Sören felt a little sadness thinking about it. But they could only keep moving forward.

After dinner Margrét and Maglor practiced some of their new songs together, in anticipation of a coming gig, and Anthony stayed awhile to watch with Sören. It seemed to Sören that their newer songs were even more melancholy than usual - though Margrét

had left the screaming behind of her punk band in Iceland, there was more of an edge to her singing voice with these new songs, as if she were conveying a hidden pain she could not safely express elsewhere. Sören once again wondered what was *really* going on with Flóki's absence, and the wheels in his head were starting to spin out of control.

Sören walked Anthony to the carport and, as had become customary, they lingered. "So, should I come back tomorrow?" Anthony asked.

Sören nodded. "If you would be so kind as to drive me to the paint store..."

"I can do that. And then we just... paint."

"Yeah, I'll take care of the mural, and you can help with the coat of purple on the walls."

"That's a deal. Hmmm, while we're out do you think we should get stuff like what they had before, like fairy lights, maybe new curtains and bedding to match..."

"Oh! Yeah, I hadn't thought of that but that's a really good idea," Sören said, and then he added, "*Thank* you." Sören chuckled. "For someone who doesn't have kids..."

"It's more, you know, being thorough. Got me far in the service, got me where I am now." Anthony looked away, and then back at Sören with a smile that seemed somewhat rueful. Sören wondered what he'd seen in the service.

"OK. Well, I should let you get home to your cat. Tomorrow at twelve?"

"You're on. Good night, Sören."

"Good night."

Sören heard himself sigh as he got back inside. His stomach was fluttering again, already giddy at the prospect of spending time with Anthony. *It's not a date, dumbass.* Sören tightened up his mental shielding, hoping it wasn't too obvious he had a stupid crush on Anthony, but he was so lost in his thoughts that he promptly walked into Maglor.

"Hey," Maglor said.

"Hi."

"Hi."

"Hi."

"Hi."

"Hi."

Maglor smiled. "Huan needs to go out. You want to come with me, take the girls for a stroll?"

That was what they did. Sören kept stealing glances at Maglor - even with the necessity of glamour out in public, Maglor was still so beautiful, taking his breath away. As Huan did his business, Maglor managed to turn an unromantic moment into a romantic one, pulling Sören into his arms and just stroking his face for a moment, his curls, looking into his eyes.

"I love you, you know," Maglor said.

"I love you too."

"I'm glad you're making a friend," Maglor said, and Sören knew he was referring to Anthony. "And I'm glad that Ali and Kenny are going to be living with us. It's good to have family around after... everything."

Sören nodded. "Thank you, again, for saying yes when I asked."

"There was no way Nicolae or myself would say no. But Sören..." Maglor cocked his head to one side. "*As you know*..."

Sören chuckled; teasing Dooku about his verbal tic would never stop being funny. They'd probably still find it funny two hundred years from now.

Maglor looked around to make sure there were no cars or passerby, nobody else n a walk who could eavesdrop. He lowered his voice nonetheless. "I'm usually unglamoured at home when it's just us. At some point, and probably soon, we need to talk to them about... what I am."

Sören nodded. "I'm sorry. I don't want to force you to glamour yourself at home -"

"Well, I know, but that's actually less of an issue to me than if I accidentally slip, and that's a distinct possibility if I'm practicing harp or emotions are running high for whatever reason."

"Oof, yeah, I didn't think about that. I guess I'm so used to seeing you unglamoured around the house that it didn't occur to me you'd have to glamour yourself with them living there."

"At some point I also think we probably need to tell Anthony, if he's going to be a regular at the house. MI6 *does* know I'm not human, they just don't know the specifics." Maglor smiled without humor. "They'd think I was taking the piss if I told them I was a Tolkien character."

"Yeah." Sören's heart skipped a beat, thinking of Anthony being brought more into the fold. "Though, seeing you unglamoured for the first time was devastating and I'd already seen your ears and... and." Sören didn't know how to finish the sentence. "Even if Anthony knows you're not human, it's still going to be, well..." Sören made a vague hand gesture. "A non-trivial thing, to show him."

"Hence my wording of 'at some point'. Could be days, could be weeks, could be months. We'll play it by ear." Maglor pushed his hair aside just a little to show the point of his ear, making Sören laugh, and Maglor laughed too.

"I like your ears," Sören said, and immediately felt like that was one of the stupidest things he'd ever said.

"I like your ears too."

"Really?"

"Sören, do you still honestly think I'm not attracted to you?" Maglor tugged on Sören's ear.

"Your ears are cute. You're just... cute in general." He booped Sören's nose.

"I'm not what I used to be."

"You're still beautiful to me," Maglor said. "You don't have a problem with the way Nicolae looks now, after all, do you?"

"God, no." Sören chuckled. "It's as if Ñolo knew I have a thing for silver daddies."

"I think he did," Maglor said quietly, and then scooped up Huan's leave and they resumed walking.

Sören wondered about that, but he didn't say anything, since even though nobody else was around, he didn't want to take the risk of having that conversation with the potential of being heard. Besides which, he'd had enough depth for one day - it was bad enough his wheels were still spinning about the absence of Flóki, and he just wanted to relax now.

"It'll be all right, Sören," Maglor said, sensing the twinge of angst and worry. "One way or another, it will be all right. Our love is stronger than our enemies' hate."

–

Even in a plain navy blue T-shirt and ratty jeans, Anthony looked delectable, and Sören couldn't stop stealing glances at him as they shopped, first for paint and then for curtains, bedding, and decor for Metallica and Megadeth's new room. Sören was feeling tongue-tied enough that he couldn't say much as they shopped, but that was perhaps just as well because Anthony was *on a mission*, fiercely concentrating on what needed to be done as if he were on orders from the government itself. Sören again found himself wondering what Anthony's time in the service had been like, and if he had any interesting stories from his years in MI6 prior to meeting the family.

Sören found himself wondering about Anthony in general. Wanting to get to know him better, wanting to unravel the riddle wrapped in the mystery inside the enigma.

*That's not all I'd like to unravel.*Sören was trying desperately not to think sexual thoughts about Anthony, and failing. The intoxicating smell of Anthony's cologne didn't help.

Getting down to work with painting was a welcome distraction. Even with just applying a coat of paint to the walls, not starting the mural yet, it felt good to have a brush in his hand again, and Sören looked at the plain wall and in his mind's eye he saw a finished canvas, the vision taking shape of what he would do with the mural for the kids.

Such was Sören's intensity that he ended up wearing some of the paint, and when they took a break for lemonade, Anthony laughed at him. "I know you like your sister's hair but that's not how you do it," Anthony teased.

"You're right," Sören said, and he used the Force to touch the tip of Anthony's nose with a paintbrush. "That's how you do it."

They started chasing each other around the room, splattering each other with purple paint, shrieking and laughing, until Dooku had to come in and just stand in the doorway, glaring, hands on hips.

"What in the fresh hell are you two doing?" Dooku asked.

"Painting a room," Sören said.

"You are a disaster." Dooku rolled his eyes, though they were twinkling, and Sören knew he was more amused than annoyed - he was used to Sören's antics by now. Then Dooku announced, "I am grilling outdoors."

"Hi Grilling Outdoors, I'm Sören."

Dooku gave Sören a look, and Anthony shook with silent laughter, shaking harder when Dooku glowered at him. "Do not encourage him," Dooku said.

"He doesn't need encouragement, I'm sure," Anthony said.

Sören grinned. "Hi Sure, I'm Sören..."

Dooku facepalmed and made a noise, and then he pulled himself together - face pink, eyes crinkled at the corners, trying to look serious even as his eyes were laughing. "I am making sausages at Ali and Kenny's request."

"Hi Making Sausages -"

"*Sören.*" Dooku shook his head and folded his arms. Then he said, "I assume you want three as your usual?"

Sören nodded. *Sorry not sorry,* he spoke into Dooku's mind.

Brat, Dooku replied. Dooku turned to Anthony. "How many sausages would you like?"

"Three, yes, please."

Sören's mind immediately went into the gutter again, this time thinking of what it would be like for Anthony to be invited into bed with him, Dooku, and Maglor. *OK, let's not,* Sören thought to himself. It was bad enough Frankie was still mortal and he'd started to get a little paranoid with her pregnancy.

They painted a little while longer, and finally dinner was ready, sausages and potato salad and a garden salad. Maglor tried not to laugh at the sight of Sören and Anthony splattered with paint, while Ali and Kenny didn't even bother to contain their amusement. "That's a great look, mate," Ali said as Sören sat down.

"Yas queen, I'm fa-bu-lous," Sören said, and started snapping.

After dinner, Sören and Anthony finished up the coat of purple on the walls. Sören had used the Force in addition to his own hands, to make the job go faster. The mural still needed to be done, but the room itself was now a bright purple and Sören smiled just at the color of it.

"I hope they'll be happy," Anthony said.

"Me too." Sören nodded.

Anthony glanced over. "I should get home."

"Yeah, go see your kitty." Sören couldn't resist. "If he recognizes you all covered in paint like that."

Anthony chuckled, turning beetroot. "I barely recognize me right now."

Sören walked Anthony out to the carport. "You're still coming for dinner tomorrow, right?"

"Of course. Besides, if you're doing the mural tomorrow I want to see the finished product."

"It's just a unicorn and some cats and bunnies. Kid stuff." Sören bit his lip. "I am a big kid, that said."

"I still want to see it."

"Okies." Sören grinned, feeling surprised and touched. "Well, enjoy the rest of your evening."

"You too."

Sören would have waited until tomorrow to start the mural, but a few hours later he was still up - his brain once again bothering him about why Flóki hadn't come to the family party, and what that meant in the context of Ingwion's rejection - and he found the paint was dry enough for him to safely begin the mural. He stayed up all night losing himself in the fun little world he created in his mind, reminded of Lisa Frank paraphernalia but still different, a unicorn prancing in a garden of lush flowers - psychedelic takes on poppies and roses and lilies, sunflowers of all the colors of the rainbow - the unicorn itself farting a rainbow as kitties and bunnies played, with a kitty and bunny riding on the unicorn's back. It was a happy place, and Sören needed that childlike whimsy after everything he'd been through just in the last six months, never mind his entire life. And as he painted, he put love into it - the same touch of the Living Force that had quickened under his brush when he painted Dooku's meditation room in Bermondsey what seemed like ages ago, but now he was trying to bring a sense of happiness and peace to Metallica and Megadeth, a refuge.

Sören painted until eight in the morning, and at last the mural was done to his satisfaction. He took a shower to wash the paint off, and instead of going to bed, he went to the pool to cool down the creative fire lest he stay in "the zone" and end up staying awake for three days making more things, as he'd found out the hard way from past experience. As he waded in the pool he noticed Ali watching him through the glass door and she waved to him, and he waved back.

Ali came out and sat by the pool. "Hey," Ali said.

"Hi."

"You're not a morning person." Ali cocked her head to one side.

"No. I didn't sleep." Sören gave a nervous laugh. "I got the mural done, though."

"Oh, bloody brilliant, I can't wait to see." Then Ali pursed her lips. "You needed a distraction, I take it."

Sören sighed. "Yeah." He ran a hand through his curls, then rubbed his beard. He decided to just come out and say it. "I'm really bothered by Flóki not showing up the other

night."

"That seems kind of off, yeh."

"By itself, it would only bother me a little, but with what's going on with Ingmar..." Sören shook his head.

Ali nodded and folded her arms. "I'd be lying if I said I still wasn't upset about what happened. I tell myself that maybe I really was out of line and I shouldn't be this pissed off, but..." Ali made a vague hand gesture. "I don't get what kind of game he's playing with you. He really owed it to you to sit down and have, you know, a conversation like an adult instead of just ghosting you."

Sören nodded. "Especially when he wouldn't let Maglor ghost me. If there's one thing I fucking hate, it's hypocrites and double standards." Sören cringed a little. "Not that I hate Ingmar or anything -"

"Oh, I think you do, now, just a little. He hurt your pride." Their eyes met.

Sören closed his eyes. "He did a lot for us - he made us immortal. Our aunt Jane, Gitta's wife, was going to die of cancer, and his blood healed her. I don't want to sound ungrateful -"

"A person can do nice things for you and still hurt you, Sören."

"Isn't that the truth." Sören gave a bitter snort as he thought of his relationship with Justin Roberts. "But... it still... I don't know. Feelings are complicated."

"They sure are. Like I said, I feel like I probably don't have a right to be angry, but *I am.*" Ali's eyes flashed and her nostrils flared. "He hurt someone I care about very much."

"God." Sören couldn't help laughing. "You really *are* related to me. Shit."

"I have a bit of a temper," Ali said. "I've learned over the years to try to keep it in check and avoid getting into trouble, but... it still acts up. Right now, it's taking me everything I've got to not go over there and give him a piece of my mind. Which is a very stupid idea. Riding off to war, letting that be the hill I die on..."

A frisson went down Sören's spine. Something was starting to click in the back of his head, and he wasn't sure what it was, just yet, but there was something very *familiar* about what Ali said - and the things Ali had done, the lengths she was willing to go for her family - that went above and beyond them being related by blood. Sören decided to put his feelers out and see what, if anything, was there. "Ali, this is going to be a weird question, but..."

Ali's eyebrows shot up.

Sören went on. "Do you ever... uh... do you ever have, like... visions?"

"Do you mean... precognition?"

"Well, not just seeing the future, but... maybe seeing 'sideways', like the present but things about it are different, like seeing into another world... or... or... something that feels like the past. Something that feels different entirely, but also feels real." Sören swallowed hard. "Not just visions while you're awake, but dreams, too."

Ali exhaled sharply. "I've... had some of those, I guess, yeah."

Sören waited for it, and Ali said, "OK, so this sounds completely fucking crazy -"

"You see who you're talking to, right? I promise not to laugh." Sören couldn't resist. "Unless you're dreaming about wearing a clown suit and fucking Justin Bieber or something."

"That's weirdly specific, Sören." Ali laughed, and then she stretched and leaned forward, hugging her knees. She closed her eyes and when she opened them, they looked faraway. "Sometimes I dream about being in a body that isn't, well, this."

"Oh?" Sören broke out into gooseflesh. He braced himself.

"Yeh. I..." Ali rubbed her face and gave him a look like an annoyed wet cat. "This sounds really kind of... fucked up, I guess... but in these dreams I'm *white.* And I'm a guy. With long, long, long red hair. And one hand."

Sören's jaw dropped.

"I told you it was fucking crazy -"

"No, go on." Sören felt himself screaming internally. "So... what are you doing in these dreams?"

"Being tortured, in some of them. In others... killing people. A lot of people. Marcus is there. Kenny is in some of them, but he's... also... white." Ali cringed. "I'm sorry. That's -"

Sören got out of the pool. "Ali, come with me."

Sören toweled off and Ali followed him inside. Sören made a beeline for the library, which was not the size of the library Dooku used to have in Bermondsey, but they'd been trying to replace what they'd lost over the last few months and had a decent collection. Sören skimmed the shelves until he found what he was looking for. He thrust a copy of *The Silmarillion* at Ali.

"Read this," he said.

"Now?"

"Well... not right now right now," Sören said. "And I mean, the book is dense, and kind of depressing, so it may take you a few days, but you'll... you'll see what I mean."

Ali raised an eyebrow. "I don't get it."

"Do you trust me?"

Ali took a deep breath, then she nodded.

"Just trust me that you need to read this, even if you don't understand why." Then Sören yawned - the dip in the pool had done its job, and he definitely needed a nap, at least. "I'm gonna go to bed. I'll see you in a few hours."

As Sören walked off to bed, his heart beat a little faster, and he shuddered.*Things just*

got a lot more interesting.

Chapter 9

By Friday, April thirtieth, Ali had finished reading *The Silmarillion*. So had Kenny.

Ali's father Böðvar was an avid reader, and Ali had been raised with a keen love of books. She had read the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy at a young age. But she had never read *The Silmarillion*, so there was no way her dreams could have been consciously influenced by the book.

And reading that book was like walking into her dreams. Not just for her, but for Kenny too, and Kenny had never even read Tolkien, he'd only seen the *Lord of the Rings* and *The Hobbit* movies which weren't completely true to canon.

It gave her more questions than answers. Starting with the fact that Tolkien's work was fiction, the work of a vivid, brilliant imagination - it felt completely daft to believe oneself a fictional character, the same way some unhinged people believed they were Jesus Christ. Ali couldn't ignore the fact that *The Silmarillion* seemed to be telling her life story, a past life as Maedhros, Kenny with a past life as Fingon, but it also made no sense how that could even be possible.

Ali had finished reading the book two days ago, and Kenny had finished twenty-four hours ago, and they had agreed to sit with their feelings for at least a day before talking to Sören about what they'd read and why Sören had asked them to read it. It had been a difficult couple of days for Ali, who wanted to be close to her cousin while he was still obviously hurting from Ingmar's rejection, but she was feeling very weirded out by this entire thing, including and especially how Sören *knew*. It was one thing for someone to say "hey, read this book" because they knew reported dreams sounded like the canon, but Ali got the sense that Sören wouldn't be suggesting she read it unless he himself had something going on, that he hadn't yet disclosed to them.

So after Kenny had sat with his feelings for a full day, they had mutually decided not to wait any longer, and just get the awkward conversation over and done with. Dooku, seeming to sense through the Force that something was brewing, went out grocery shopping - Metallica and Megadeth had asked to tag along, and Dooku didn't see why not; Ali hoped they weren't going to try to butter up "Grampa" for sugary cereal and sweets but she got the feeling Dooku wasn't so indulgent. Marcus took Huan for a walk. Sören put the girls down for a nap and was about to head out to the pool and Ali said, "Sören, can we talk to you for a sec?"

They sat in the living room and for a few minutes there was an awkward silence. Sören finally said, "You read the book, já?"

"We read the book," Ali said. "You think we're Maedhros and Fingon."

"I don't think, I know," Sören said.

Sören was an artist, he was eccentric, and he had mental health issues. Ali really wanted to dismiss this as "just Sören being his weird self" but she couldn't shake how unnerved she was by the book mirroring back dreams that felt so *real*, like memories she personally had lived. And yet, she also couldn't shake how unnerved she was by going down this road, that accepting this as the truth was going to break her very foundation of reality.

"How do you know?" Ali asked.

"You... you read the book," Sören said, blinking slowly as if confused. "I mean, it's obvious -"

"Sören, that book is fiction," Ali said. "We are not fictional characters, we are real people."

"Tolkien wrote it about real people," Sören said.

"I... no. Sören, Tolkien is even older than Nicolae, you weren't there, you wouldn't know -"

Marcus walked in with Huan, then, and Sören said, "He would."

"I would what?" Marcus asked.

Sören gestured to Ali and Kenny. "They just got through reading a certain book by a certain professor you are acquainted with."

Marcus's eyes widened and his mouth opened slightly. "Oh." He looked at Sören, then he looked at them. "*Oh.*"

Ali folded her arms. "I'm not going to deny that it's really fucking weird for me to never have read that book in my life prior to a few days ago, and see my recurring dreams of the last few months come to life on the pages, as... as... as... Maedhros. I don't know what's up with that. But fiction is not reality -"

Marcus cocked his head and looked at Kenny. "Are you also having the dreams?"

"Yeah," Kenny said. "The book says my name is Fingon..."

"Right." Marcus looked at Sören, who nodded, and Marcus nodded back. "Let's do this."

Sören waved his hand and used the Force to turn off the light in the living room. Before Ali could ask why he did that, Marcus started to glow like a living lamp, and all her words were gone, not even able to think, just see, in awe. His already clear complexion became even more flawless, as if he were carved of marble. Ali watched as Marcus's hair fell from the middle of his back to his thighs. He removed his glasses and she saw his eyes shining like labradorite. He tucked his hair behind his ears and she saw the points.

She had dreamed about him, of course - the book called him Maglor - but now here he was, in a form that made it harder to argue that the book was strictly fictional. This was no mind trick of the Force, especially when he came forward and put Ali's hand on the pointed tip of his ear, to feel that it was real.

"I told Tolkien the story of my people," Maglor said softly. "Our people. He did not tell the whole story of what I told, nor did I tell him the whole story of what I know. He changed some details – my uncle Finarfin is dead, and he wrote Finarfin as still living, to try to cheer me up." Maglor gave a bitter, humorless laugh. "But I needed someone to preserve the history, and in a changing world I felt my best odds of survival were to further reinforce the idea that Elves were just fairy stories and not walking among mortals. Not that there are many of us walking among mortals, now."

"And yet, you do." Ali's voice was hushed with reverence.

"You have really nice hair," Kenny said, and then his hand slapped over his mouth like he'd said something idiotic.

Maglor laughed – this time with humor - and his laughter was more rich, more resonant than usual - Ali realized then that Maglor didn't just mask his appearance with people not in the know, but he disguised his voice. Just his speaking voice, his laugh, was magnificent.

Ali felt a touch of sadness that Maglor had to hide himself, and then a deeper touch of sadness that he'd had to hide himself around *them*, all these months. "I'm sorry," Ali said.

"For what?" Maglor asked.

"I didn't know -"

Maglor shrugged. "I don't fault you for that."

Ali felt like her brain was breaking. As beautiful as Maglor was, as much as it felt like a privilege to look upon such uncommon beauty, there was also something terrifying about it too, all the power in him. People had been on a mission to convert Aboriginal "heathens" when she was young and tried to force Christianity down her throat, which she'd rejected, but for the first time she understood why the Bible had all those stories of people being afraid in the presence of angels. Even as she knew Maglor was family and he meant her no harm, the intensity of him was overwhelming. Tears came to Ali's eyes, and she saw Kenny was crying a little too.

"It's all right." Maglor passed them a box of tissues. "It's OK."

"I'm sorry for reacting like this," Ali said. "I mean, shit, I get tired of people exoticizing me, so it's probably tiresome for you to have people freak out on you like this over and over again across millennia..."

"Shhhhh." Maglor patted her, and his touch radiated, continuing to pulse after his hand left her arm. "You don't need to apologize, Maitimo."

Before Ali could break down and cause a scene sobbing, which she didn't want to do to Maglor even though he'd told her not to apologize, she turned to Sören. A question had been answered, but now there were even more questions, as if the presence of some information had made everything else exponentially more complicated. "How did you know?"

"Well I mean, Ali, Maglor *is* my partner. It's kind of hard to keep that from someone you're fu -"

"I know *that*, Captain Obvious, I worded that wrong." Ali took a deep breath. "It's not just that he showed you his true self one day, is it?" Something felt like wheels turning in the back of her head. Even with Sören knowing who and what Maglor really was, he wouldn't have heard about the dreams and just assumed "reincarnated Elves" unless there had been precedence for it.

Ali's eyes focused on the flame sleeve tattoo going up one of Sören's arms. She thought about the phoenixes on his back. His art, and the energy in it. His intense caring, love like a consuming fire -

Oh shiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiit.

"Wait here," Sören said. "I have something to show you."

Ali braced herself. She had a feeling what it was, but she didn't know for sure...

...and it was one thing to expect it and another thing to see it. Ali heard herself let out a tiny shriek as Sören walked out carrying two white gems that glowed even more brightly than Maglor did - if Maglor was a lamp, Sören was the sun. The stones cast rainbows on the ceiling and walls, and Ali started to sob with a mixture of relief that what was stolen had been found and reclaimed, and rage that it had been stolen to begin with... bitterness at what the evil of Melkor - and the Valar for allowing it to happen - had cost their entire family.

Kenny covered his mouth, shaking with sobs.

"I..." Ali blinked. There was no way this could be made up. "I..." She started pointing at the crown of Silmarils, just point-point-pointing, her hand trembling. "You... you..."

Sören came forward, forward, forward, the light searing Ali's eyes, blinding, and he took Ali into his arms. Kissed her brow. "Nelya."

"Adar." Ali broke down, weeping as if her heart had been torn out. "Ai, Adar."

Sören pet her locks, rocked her in his arms.

"I'm so sorry," Ali apologized again, this time for completely different reasons. "I'm so sorry -"

"Hi So Sorry, I'm Ada."

Ali facepalmed and then she gave him a shove, laughing and crying. "Goddammit..."

"I had to." But now Sören was tearing up too.

"I failed you," Ali said, serious again, heart breaking as she remembered plunging into the chasm, not able to bear the torment any longer. "I -"

"No." Sören shook his head. "I will not hear it."

"How did you..." Ali couldn't believe that he had the Silmarils.

"Long story," Sören said. Then he took one of the stones and thrust it at Ali. "You can touch it."

"No -" Ali recoiled, having the vivid memory of her burned hand, the indescribable, intolerable pain, like being flayed with acid.

Maglor showed Ali his right hand, which had been badly disfigured in her dreams. It was completely healed now, like it had never been damaged. "Go on."

And then Sören was putting one of the stones in her hand, and closing her hand over it. To her surprise, the gem did not burn. It was warm to the touch, but not scalding. It pulsed in her hand.

Ali wept afresh. She had never sobbed so brokenly in her life, not even when two of her brothers were sentenced to prison. Now she completely fell apart, and Kenny crying with her just made it worse.

Maglor, Sören, Ali and Kenny fell into a group hug, rocking, crying, the joy at being reunited after so long, and the grief that they had ever been torn asunder in the first place. Ali couldn't believe she had doubted just a few minutes ago - she knew in her heart, in her gut, in her very soul that this was real, even though it still made no sense, even as she still had more questions than answers, her entire life had led up to this moment. She had come home, and it seemed to Ali that it wasn't just to find the people she loved more than life itself, but there was a higher purpose, somehow. Things they had to *do.* A destiny.

Dooku came back with the kids to find them in a group hug. Metallica and Megadeth went right over. For a brief instant Ali panicked, as Maglor was still unglamoured and Sören had the Silmarils out, but the kids were as nonchalant and accepting as can be, and then Metallica tapped Maglor on the shoulder, waved - Maglor waved back - and Metallica said, "I'm glad you're not hiding anymore."

Ali's jaw dropped again. "You..." Ali looked back at Maglor. "Did you show them, before this?"

"No," Maglor said, meeting her eyes, and she believed it. Maglor looked at Metallica, as if he was looking through the little girl, and then gave Megadeth the same look. "You can see things, can't you?"

Metallica and Megadeth nodded together. "We knew you were shiny," Metallica said.

Maglor cocked his head to one side. "What else do you know, little one?"

"My name used to be, uh, Carnivore or something," Metallica said. Out of the corner of her eye, Ali saw Dooku cringe and tried not to laugh.

"And mine was Ang... uh..." Megadeth giggled. "Angy." *That's not a word,* Dooku broadcasted.

"Caranthir and Angrod," Maglor whispered. "I can't believe it."

"*How* did you know that?" Ali asked, wondering what was going on.

Metallica shrugged. "Dreams and stuff."

*God, I hope their dreams haven't been traumatic, at that age.*Ali reached out to hold them tight, feeling fiercely protective.

As soon as the groceries were put away, Dooku came over to join in the hug.

"As you know, this is an important first step," Dooku said. "It feels even more critical now that you stay with us."

"Yeah." Maglor grabbed Ali's arm and locked with a vise-like grip. "You're not getting away this time."

Ali chuckled and kissed his cheek, then patted it with her free hand. Maglor's smile broke her heart all over again.

Then Kenny spoke. "What I don't understand is how. Like... how we got here. How we went from that to this."

Ali nodded.

"Well..." Sören looked at Dooku, then Maglor, then back at Ali and Kenny. "It's a long story and while I'm normally in favor of being honest with your kids, this is a difficult conversation and it's one that should be reserved for the grown-ups only, till we figure out a way to talk to them about it, so... after the kids go to bed?"

"OK," Ali said. As much as she was dying of curiosity, it could wait.

Dooku patted Metallica and Megadeth. "In the meantime, would you like to help in the kitchen with dinner?"

"Race you," Megadeth said to Metallica, and they ran off together to the kitchen.

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After Metallica and Megadeth went to bed, and Kate and Tori had been washed and changed, Sören rocking them in their bassinet, the adults sat around the living room.

"OK." Sören took a deep breath. "You know the Doom of the Valar? That's still... in effect."

Ali took a moment, sitting with it. Then she said, "I don't accept that being born Aboriginal was some sort of curse. I probably hate the Valar as much as you do, but -"

"To be honest," Maglor said, "when I started to suspect that you guys were my brother and cousin reborn, I wondered myself how far the Doom actually goes."

"Fair," Sören said, nodding. "I certainly don't think being non-white is any sort of curse myself. I think it's cool I have an Aboriginal cousin." Sören made a face then. "Er, sorry. Not trying to, like, fetishize your -"

"It's OK, Sören." Ali chuckled and patted him. "Yer good, mate."

Then Kenny folded his arms and tapped his elbow, deep in thought. A minute later he said, "So how exactly did you come to the conclusion that being born Mortal was part of the Doom, some sort of curse?"

Sören looked at Dooku and Maglor. "We saw it in one of the palantir. Gandalf -"

"Holy fucking shit, you met Gandalf?" Kenny's eyes were wide. Ali herself felt stunned. *This gets weirder and weirder all the time.*

Sören nodded solemnly. "At my sister and Frankie's wedding a little under two years ago, Gandalf was there and he had us look into his palantir. What we saw was... well... not pleasant. He gave us the palantir when we went to Canada to pick up Kate and Tori - he was teaching at the same university as my brother and when Dag went missing..." Sören swallowed hard, eyes misting up at the mention of Dag.

Ali and Kenny looked at each other, and then Kenny said, "So... like, not to be a dick, but you're absolutely sure Gandalf is on your side?"

"I'm very sure he is, yeah," Sören said. "Yes, I know he was a Maia and he served the Valar at one time, but he's renounced them."

"OK, I trust your judgment on that. But he served them for a*very* long time, right?" Kenny leaned forward. "Like, eons."

Sören nodded again, and Maglor also nodded.

"Where are you going with this?" Maglor asked.

"Just because he may not serve the Valar anymore, well... is it possible that the palantir showed you what the Valar wanted you to see?" Kenny shrugged.

"Oh my *god.*" Sören's jaw dropped. "*Jesus*..."

"OK." Dooku made a "be calm" gesture. "What Kenneth suggested is certainly within the realm of possibility. We do have the palantir where we saw the vision that implied mortality was part of the Doom; it makes sense that the Valar would want us to hate ourselves as we are now."

"It's free real estate," Kenny said, quoting the meme, nodding.

Dooku also nodded. "We could perhaps attempt to... cleanse the palantir of the Valar's energy and influence... and scry again. See what really happened with how the Doom impacts our lives here and now."

Sören looked at Maglor's unburnt hand, and he said, "I happen to have something that might do the trick."

Maglor went to retrieve the palantir, which looked like a dark crystal ball, but when Ali stared at it she began to see something sparkly swirl around inside of it, like a nebula of stars. Sören put the palantir between the two Silmarils on the coffee table - there was something hilarious about how casual that was with that sort of sacred artifact that made Ali want to gigglefit, but she sobered as she watched the palantir light up with white light, like a third Silmaril, the entire room going white, then ultraviolet, like a nuclear blast.

When the flash faded and the Silmarils were the only objects glowing - besides Maglor himself - and the palantir was a dark crystal again, Ali heard a thrumming sound like the warp engine on *Star Trek: The Next Generation*, and it was coming from the crystal. After the thrumming sound subsided, Sören nodded and said, "I think it's ready."

Sören put the crown of Silmarils back on his head and pushed the palantir to the center of the coffee table. Everyone moved closer, took hands, and stared into the glass.

The palantir showed Fëanor, Fingolfin, Finarfin, Maedhros and Fingon in the Halls of Mandos. Manwë approached and said, *You will choose how you are reborn.*

You will give us time, Fëanor said.

I owe you nothing, Spirit of Fire, but in our mercy *I will concede that to you.*

After Manwë walked off, Fëanor scoffed, rage flaring in him. *Do not speak to me of mercy, you who let the Jail Crow torment our family and then would blame us for fighting back.*

Ali saw Fëanor in life, taking secret marriage vows with Fingolfin... and also Finarfin. Creating the Silmarils in honor of the light of their love, one Silmaril for each Finwion brother. Fëanor took his brothers' hands now and they looked out at the weave of worlds

and saw Maglor alone, wandering, grief-stricken.

I will go where my son is, Fëanor said. *He dwells among Men now... I shall become one so he is not alone.*

You know that you will be even more vulnerable in Mortal flesh, Maedhros said. *They will use this to hurt you.*

They will hurt me anyway. And then Fëanor flashed a smile - not a pleasant smile, but predatory, cunning. *They will think I am weak, in Mortal form, and that will make it perhaps easier for them to do whatever it is they plan on doing to me when I am there. Perhaps they will even devise new torments. I am sure my life will not be easy. But I will not leave my one surviving son alone, in the world. And our love for each other, the fire in our blood, is strong. I believe we will find each other at the appointed time. And that weakness they perceive in me, in all of you if you would join me... the way they will underestimate me and all of us... that will be their undoing. Let them think us weak. Let them think us defeated. They will never see it coming until it is too late. It will be pleasure to burn.*

You will lead, and I will follow, Fingolfin said, a hand to his heart. *Always.*

Always, Finarfin said.

I will go with you, Father, Maedhros said. *And for my brother's sake.*

I will follow you, Maitimo, Fingon said.

The five joined hands.

The palantir showed the death of Fëanor, mortally wounded by Balrogs - including one Ali recognized as *Flóki* - and there was more weeping as Fëanor burnt up and became smoke and ash. His spirit descended like a phoenix into Iceland, with its volcanoes.

Ali had heard about Odin's role in harming the family from her father, and now she got to see it - the Valar giving Miriel to the Aesir, forced into service as a Valkyrie. Miriel's rebellion, with one of the warriors of Valhalla, and they were cast out and reborn as Mortal. Miriel as Brynhildur screamed as she gave birth to twin boys.

The palantir showed Fëanor fashioning the Mortal form he would wear. *If I will be human, I will be a beautiful one.*

The hand of the Valar was heavy upon Sören, intensified by Odin fearing Fëanor as the Fenrir-wolf prophesied to destroy him, so many traumas and tragedies in Sören's life. Intensified by the meddling of Sauron, Sauron whispering in his head, in his dreams, taking the evil corruption already in Justin's soul and making it much, much worse.

Fingolfin's death, falling in single combat with Melkor. Nicolae Dooku, born in London after World War II. The briefest flash of Fingolfin and Fëanor long ago, making passionate love, Fëanor calling him *Adar* - Ali felt Kenny cringe at that, *oh god Dad TMI* - and so it was Fingolfin became the elder, to give Sören the father figure he needed.

Fingon's death at the sword. Fingon, finding the rich history and culture of the Korean people fascinating, finding them beautiful, birthed into a lineage with Korean shamans.

Maedhros's suicide, plunging into the chasm, making Ali weep again as she felt it, the

excruciating physical and mental pain that had brought her to plunge down the chasm, no hope left. Maedhros searching the Earth for where he might like to go, and falling in love with the Australian outback. Admiring the Aboriginal people. Regretting there not being a way to have children with Fingon in life, being willing to be female in this life to give him that someday, but not telling Manwë that was why - like a fool, Manwë thought that scattering them over the world would keep them apart, which was what the Valar wanted, to keep them weak, and keep them from "sin".

At last there was Finarfin. The palantir showed Finarfin going into exile with his brothers, and Fëanor finally telling him to go back.

You must go back. You cannot come with me.

Finarfin swallowed hard, a stricken look on his face.*Why?*

Fëanor took a deep breath. *You know why. They will kill you. They will kill your children.*

Finarfin shook his head, clenched his fists.*I told you I would stand with you, fight with you, die for you -*

I know, dear brother. It is easy enough to die for me. Go live for me. You may be the last of our blood when this is done. Someone needs to carry the fire. Go.

Finarfin tugged at the hem of Fëanor's tunic, and his cloak.*I will not leave you! I will not, I will not, I will not...*

You must go back, Fëanor said, stern, unyielding. He pushed Finarfin back.*You must renounce me. You must tell them you were wrong.*

No, I will not deny you...

You will, or your children's blood will be on thy hands... and mine.

Finarfin went back to Valinor with the wife he had been forced to marry... and the wife Fingolfin had been forced to marry. Ali's heart broke once again as she watched Finarfin live a sexless, loveless life, cool and aloof to the world as he grieved, pretending piety while he inwardly seethed in his hatred for the Valar. Finarfin unleashed some of that pent-up anger in the violence of the War of Wrath, magnificent in his rage like a sun scorching the earth. Then he fought alongside Ecthelion – Maglor's sons – against Balrogs. To try to avenge Fëanor, a desperate mission. Finarfin and Ecthelion were once again glorious in battle, slaying Balrogs, striking fear in their hearts.

But not enough. They all watched in the palantir as*Flóki* mortally wounded Finarfin, as Finarfin lay there, bleeding out, his blood running in rivers of flame.

Sören let out a shriek that, for an instant, Ali was sure would shatter the palantir, but the palantir did not shatter, only "shut off" the story revealed in the glass. Sören began to keen, sobbing violently as Dooku and Maglor reached out for him, tried to console him. Kate and Tori started squalling too, sensing Sören's anguish. Sören fell off the couch on his knees, rocking back and forth, crying as brokenly as Ali had ever seen a man cry.

"He killed Ara. **He killed Ara**..." Sören let out another wordless scream. “When Flóki confessed he'd helped Gothmog kill me... he could have also confessed then that he'd killed Finarfin. But he didn't. I wasn't just going to assume that because he'd been a Balrog, that he was one of the Balrogs in the group that Ecthelion and Finarfin had fought

against. I feel so stupid...” Sören's fists clenched “And Ingwion knew. He fucking knew and he didn't tell me. Finarfin is his cousin, for fuck's sake, you'd think his blood would mean something to him...”

“Fuck,” was all Maglor could say, putting a hand on Sören's shoulder. Sören broke down crying again.

Ali made the mental connection that Ingmar Borovkov was Ingwion and went to him, her maternal instinct kicking in - even as she was still Maedhros, she was also herself - and she pet his curls, began to rock him. "Sören. I'm so sorry..."

"That fucking oath-breaking motherfucker **Loki** killed Ara. *He killed Ara.* **He killed Arafinwë**. And he didn't tell me. And Ingwion knew and didn't fucking tell me..."

"Shhhhhhh, shhhhhh." Ali pulled him close. Her hair stood on end, drawing the connections between Flóki and Loki – realizing Ingwion was Yngvi, the Norse god Freyr. She'd read enough Greek mythology with mortals ascending – Ganymede, Psyche – to reckon the same could be true of the Norse pantheon, Elves becoming gods. Or in Loki's case, a Balrog becoming a god. Ali wondered if Loki had been an Elf before.

"And..." Sören gestured at the palantir. "You all saw it. You all *felt* it, how much Finarfin was suffering. Him going off to fight Balrogs like that was a goddamn suicide mission. But why he had to go out like *that*..." Sören covered his face with his hands, sobbing harder.

Ali knew there was nothing she could say or do to make it better, just like there had been nothing anyone could say or do when Maedhros lost Fingon, or when Maedhros and Maglor had lost their father, then their beloved uncle Fingolfin. It was a wound that could not start to heal until Sören had found whoever Finarfin had reincarnated as... which they had not gotten to see in the palantir. Ali thought about asking if they could try again, but Sören was hysterical and asking him to try to calm down seemed like a bad idea right now, considering.

Tears unnumbered ye shall shed.

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Hours later, Ali couldn't sleep. What had been seen, could not be unseen.

Ali tiptoed out to the kitchen to get a glass of water and saw Sören sitting out there, staring into space. He acknowledged her with a nod after a few seconds.

"Hey." Ali sat on the couch next to him.

"Hey." Sören leaned on her. "I'm sorry I screamed earlier, I hope the kids didn't get too riled up -"

"They're OK," Ali said. "Right now I'm worried about you."

Sören didn't even come back with a "Hi Worried About You", which was even more worrisome. Sören sighed, rubbed his face, and then he leaned back against the couch.

"I am fucking furious right now," Sören said. "Still."

"I believe it." Ali nodded. "It was bad enough that he treated you like shit a month ago, this just adds insult to injury."

"Kin or not, he's not going to disrespect me like this," Sören said.

Good. Don't roll over and take it. At least that was a positive sign, Sören up in arms rather than falling back down the pit of depression.

Sören took a deep breath and then he turned to face Ali, and there was a madness in his eyes that she'd never seen before and yet was familiar - the part of her that was still Maedhros recognized the look in Fëanor's eyes when the Silmarils had been stolen and Finwë slaughtered.

Oh shit.

Sören looked at the clock, and back at Ali. "I need to ask you a fucking crazy favor. I know it's after one in the morning, but -"

"You want me to drive you out to his place, don't you," Ali said.

Sören nodded.

Against her better judgment, Ali found herself getting up, not even bothering to change out of her pajamas, and she used the Force to pull the keys to the Land Rover from the key rack on the wall. Ali made a gesture for Sören to follow. "Let's rock."

Chapter 10

Saturday, May first had just begun, and as Sören sat in the passenger seat of the Land Rover it occurred to him that today was the six-year anniversary of when Ingwion had picked him up in a gay club in Reykjavik, in 2015, when Maglor had been gone for over a year and Sören was drowning his grief in recreational drugs and meaningless sex.

Did you know then? Sören wondered to himself. Of course, *Sören* hadn't known who he was, or who Maglor was, back then; Sören had only had the feeling of being different his whole life, and Maglor had been the first person who really got him. Sören knew that it wasn't exactly standard pickup talk to say, "Hey, I'm a Norse god and one of my friends killed you and your incestuous brother-lover from a past life, want to fuck?" but Sören would have appreciated the honesty when the puzzle began to come together, which Ingwion had been there for.

He hadn't found Finarfin yet, as far as he knew - and that was frustrating to him. It felt like adding insult to injury that his grief at seeing how Finarfin died had prevented him from continuing to see into the palantir and maybe get a glimpse of who and where Finarfin was now.

Right now... Sören still wasn't calm enough for that. Sören didn't know if he'd be calm enough for more scrying anytime soon. Right now the only thing he could think of was dealing with Ingwion.

Sören had Ali park a quarter-mile away, and then he marched to the gates of "Ingmar Borovkov's" mansion. There were of course staff on-duty twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week, and two guards stopped Sören at the gate.

"Not authorized," a big, burly bruiser told him.

"Authorize this," Sören said, and used the Force to throw him into the other, knocking both guards down. He used the Force to open the gates, and when the less burly of the two gate guards reached for his taser, Sören used the Force to grab it away and tased both of them. As a third guard approached, Sören tased him too, and when the fourth one pulled a gun, Sören raised his fist and the guard went flying into the air, beginning to choke as Sören used the Force to confiscate the gun. Sören let go of the chokehold once the gun was in his hand, and tased the fourth guard.

Sören had never used a gun in his life, and just holding one made him nervous. He saw a light go on in a window of the portion of the mansion where he knew Ingwion's bedroom was, and Sören used the Force to pick up a pebble the size of a quarter and throw it at his window. "HEY! YOU! ASSHOLE!" Sören screamed.

Now Ingwion showed himself in the window. Sören had a flare of panic about him calling the police, but that would take a fair amount of explaining. Sören picked up another pebble similar in size and Force threw it at the window. "YEAH, YOU! I'M TALKING TO YOU! COME DOWN HERE AND FACE ME!"

Sören waited - a couple of the guards were trying to pull themselves up off the ground again, and Sören used the Force to throw them back down. At last, a few minutes later, Ingwion came down with his hands up. "Drop the gun, Sören."

While on the one hand Sören knew Ingwion was still technically family, as Fingolfin and

Finarfin's cousin, he wasn't going to take any chances. Sören popped the magazine of the pistol and the bullets emptied onto the ground. Then he used the Force to apply as much pressure as he could to the gun - like he was choking it - and watched it crumple on the ground. Sören had a headache now - he didn't exert that much Force use often. But he would do it again.

"Why are you here?" Ingwion asked.

"I think you know." Sören cocked his head to one side.

"I could make a few guesses but I'd rather you tell me like an adult."

"'I'd rather you tell me like an adult.'" Sören made air quotes, fresh anger surging in him. "You mean, like you did about Loki killing Arafinwë?"

"You," Ingwion said, "were not in a good place when I brought Maglor back to you. It was going to be difficult enough for you to hear the truth about who and what you were, let alone -"

"You. Still. Owed. Me. The. Truth." Sören glared. "That's something I would have liked to know before we were, you know, intimate again. Before I fell in love with you. Because now it feels like a betrayal -"

Ingwion gave a bitter laugh. "Do not speak to me of betrayal, Sören Sigurðsson. You do not know the first thing about -"

Sören backhanded him. Not thinking, just feeling. When it was done, Sören looked at his own hand in disbelief - he was shaking with fury.

Ingwion laughed harder, as if the action had delighted him. "Oh, it is good to see that fire in you."

"I don't want to hear about how good it is to see anything from me after you fucking ghosted me. I still don't understand it -"

Ingwion held up a hand. "I would prefer to continue this conversation inside."

Sören was wary of following him inside, but he did so anyway. Ingwion led him to the kitchen and took out a bottle of champagne, pouring a glass for both of them. "Drink," he said, and then went first as if it were a show of good faith.

Sören glared over his champagne glass and drank. *The fuck is with this guy.*

Sören composed his thoughts as he sipped champagne, watching Ingwion watching him. Even now, as enraged as he was, he still found the blue-eyed, golden-haired god delicious, and he hated himself for still wanting him. Wishing they could turn back the clock and do something to fix this, somehow, some way, recapturing the magic of that summer in Iceland almost two years ago.

Finally Sören asked, "Why are *you* here? In Sydney, I mean."

Ingwion leaned against the fridge, taking a moment to consider his response. "I have a branch of the company out here and a home out here and it was a more discrete place than some of my other locales to check up on you and your family, here and looking into a few other worlds. I intended to do so from a safe distance. I did not intend for my path to

ever directly cross with yours, here in this world, again."

"Surely you can't be so naive as to think I wouldn't find you again."

"I came here in fall 2020. Intel says you came here in December. I would not have come here if you were already here."

"*Why* are you trying to avoid me? I don't fucking get it," Sören said.

"No, I don't imagine you would."

That answer infuriated Sören even more than a straight answer would have, even one that would hurt his feelings. "You went to all this trouble of making myself and Nico immortal, and offering the option of immortality to my family. Maglor tells me you bought the entire *fucking* plaza where he had a bookstore in Anchorage, terminating his store's rental agreement, and dragged him to Iceland kicking and screaming, because you wouldn't let him walk away from me. But you yourself think you can walk away from me?"

"I am not Maglor," Ingwion said. "I am used to being alone. I do not have what he had."

"The point is *you don't have to be alone.* Look, I'm not telling you that you have to come stay with us permanently if that's not your thing. But even after you not telling me about what this world's you did to my brother, you know how I am." Sören beat his heart with a fist. "You are still my blood. And if you're hurting, we want to help you. But instead you hurt me by ghosting -"

"Again, I do not expect you to understand," Ingwion said.

Sören put down his champagne flute. "Try me."

"Sören, you have two partners waiting for you at home. You don't need to be here."

"Fuck you for telling me what I do and don't need," Sören snarled. "I still love you. Even after I found out about how you decided to not tell me your friend Loki killed Ara, yes, god help me."
"You don't love me," Ingwion said. "You love the idea of me."

Sören backhanded him again. "*Don't you tell me how I fucking feel!*"

And as soon as he backhanded him that second time, Sören felt a stab of guilt for hitting someone he loved, something he'd never done before, something he'd never do to Maglor or Dooku or Frankie, or his other relatives or his children, and then a wash of terror - he'd hit a god. His brothers' kin or not, Ingwion was not someone you just provoked, and Sören wondered then if that was going to be the end of him. That feeling of panic intensified as Ingwion reached out and seized his wrists, gripping hard enough to hurt, and it took a lot to hurt Sören's body with the changes of immortality.

Sören tried to wrench free, afraid for his life, and then Ingwion grabbed him, preventing his escape, and kissed him hard.

Sören melted into the kiss, even though he didn't want to. His cock rose, and he hated himself for responding like this, hated *wanting*...

...and want he did. Ingwion gave him a smug look before kissing him again. And again. Reaching down to undo Sören's jeans.

"Damn you to the Hells, Ingwion," Sören said, not stopping him, letting out a moan as Ingwion began to kiss his neck, gave a little bite.

"Yes, Maglor is so very like you." And before Sören could say anything to that, Ingwion silenced him with a kiss, marching him towards the kitchen table, kissing all the while.

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It was over quickly. It was not making love; it could barely even be called sex. Ingwion took Sören on the table, hard and fast. While Sören climaxed, it felt empty, he didn't feel satisfied - indeed, it seemed as if Ingwion didn't care if Sören came one way or the other, this was about Ingwion getting out whatever touch-starved impulse he had, and taking out his anger on Sören's ass.

Sören still felt tenderness, even in the midst of his own anger, even in the midst of feeling like whatever had just happened was much more like the cheap sex he'd had with random strangers in 2014-2015 and not the transcendent passion he shared with Dooku, Maglor, Frankie... that he had once shared with Ingwion himself, two summers ago. Even as Ingwion kept him at an arm's length, the joining of bodies was still enough intimacy that Sören could sense the wound through his empathy, and the part of him that was Fëanor ached to comfort his kin.

So once again, Sören reached out to him, offering fire and warmth for a time, a respite from the bitter cold.

But this time instead of Ingwion merely rolling away, he shoved Sören away, and got up without even saying *go away* as he did last time, like Sören wasn't even worth that.

Livid, Sören pulled his clothes back on as quickly as he could. Ingwion was getting more champagne - just for himself, not for Sören - and Sören got in his path for an instant. "I am not your fuckboy, you will not treat me this way."

Then he walked out, middle finger in the air. In that instant, he didn't care if Ingwion was a god or not. In fact, he thought that for all the tyranny of the Valar, if Freyr was going to treat humans like they were just there to be used, he was no better.

Sören was reminded of a quote as he walked to where Ali was waiting.*He who fights monsters should see to it that he himself does not become a monster. And if you gaze for long into an abyss, the abyss gazes also into you.*

Sören Sigurðsson was done trying to drag Ingwion out of the abyss.*You have become the abyss.*

Then a chilling thought. *You might have been the abyss all along.*

Chapter 11

Three days later, Sören was still angry. He had been quietly stewing, and then, at last, unquietly. He needed an outlet for his rage, and accompanied Dooku in the garden, weeding and picking vegetables. Dooku gave Sören some space at first, working a few meters away, but after Sören began pulling up weeds more and more aggressively, Dooku finally got up, wiped his hands, and came over to Sören, gently taking his hands out of the weeds and pulling him close.

"It's all right, sweetheart," Dooku soothed, rubbing his nose in Sören's curls. He kissed his brow. "Daddy's here."

The dam broke and Sören found himself sobbing on Dooku's shoulder, angry, barking sobs that became wounded howls. "He hurted my feelings, Daddy."

"I know." Dooku took Sören's chin in his hand and stroked the beard, traced the full lips with his thumb, then booped Sören's nose - Sören managed a weak smile before Dooku pulled him close again. "You deserved better, my love."

"I don't understand." Sören sobbed harder, ashamed by the little whimpers he was making now, wishing he didn't feel so raw, so vulnerable, so *broken*. "It makes no fucking *sense.* I don't understand."

"I don't understand it either, but then, you are the center of my universe so I suppose I am biased in that I cannot fathom how anyone you give your heart to could not love you right back." Dooku's arms tightened around him. "But I am still right here, darling. And Macalaurë is here. And we will never leave you. Never again."

I wish I could believe you. Even with being immortal now - not yet another person Maglor would love and lose - and even with Maglor having been back for almost two years, Sören was still terrified he would leave again. And though he and Dooku were happy together, eternity was no guarantee of happiness and Sören hoped the old frictions of Fëanor and Fingolfin did not resurface as the years wore on.

Dooku stood up and pulled Sören up to his feet. "Come inside, love. Let's get some tea and then perhaps cuddle for awhile, hm?"

When they went inside, they saw that Maglor, Ali and Kenny had just gotten back from their trip to Bondi Beach, where they'd taken the kids, the babies, and Huan. "Oh, hello," Dooku said, and Sören waved.

Then Huan whined, and Maglor facepalmed. "Dog, you were outside for hours and *now* you have to go?" Maglor asked.

Huan nodded and whined again.

Dooku chuckled. "If you want to change, use the facilities, put your things away, Sören and I can take him outside."

"Please," Maglor said.

Dooku patted him on his way to grab the leash for Huan. Then, hand-in-hand, Sören and Dooku went out to the front yard, and led Huan out to the curb to do his business.

Their street was fairly quiet, so when Sören heard a car slowly coming down the road, he naturally turned his head in its direction, curious. He felt it before he saw it - *Ingwion.*

"Oh, *shit.*" Sören felt himself scowl. "Just what I fucking needed today."

Dooku gave a slight hand raise. "I shall deal with this. Stay calm."

Sören snorted.

"All right, well, Fëanáro, if you shan't stay calm, stay... out of trouble." Dooku rubbed Sören's shoulder and waited as the Bentley pulled up and Ingwion and Flóki got out. "Greetings, gentlemen. What brings you here this afternoon?"

"We came to talk," Ingwion said, his tone and expression neutral.

"Talk." Even though Dooku flashed him a look, Sören couldn't quite restrain himself, only react. "Did you come to fucking apologize?"

"Now, dear." Dooku put a firm hand on Sören and he said, "We were just about to have some tea. Would you care to join us?" The question, though polite, had an icy steel behind it that indicated it would be a bad idea to refuse.

Ingwion and Flóki followed them inside. Maglor, Ali and Kenny had been laughing at something and as soon as the two gods walked in, they froze as if whatever it was wasn't funny anymore. Maglor's eyes widened with alarm, and then they narrowed with anger, and Sören could feel the fury, white-hot, like a living reactor. Sören himself was on that edge of wanting to explode, wanting to be done with the pleasantries and pretense of civility, but he also understood that if they were here, there was a reason and he was willing to give them the floor, for a time.

Dooku made tea as everyone sat around the living room, quietly waiting, the tension so thick it could be cut with a knife. Sören tried not to look at the two gods, but he kept stealing glances at them, feeling a mixture of desire and rage, fondness and wrath. He had loved Ingwion at one time, and a part of him still did, but now his anger was as fierce as his love. Fëanor would forgive his kin anything – his brothers' kin counted as his kin for all intents and purposes - and that part of Sören was alive and well. But he was also more than Fëanor now, he was the lived sum of his own experiences in this life. And he was done letting other people treat him the way Ingwion had treated him a few nights ago. He was not anyone's victim, scapegoat or punching bag any longer.

When Dooku came out with the tea service, Ali told Metallica and Megadeth, "Can you guys go in the playroom? The grownups need to discuss grownup things." The kids nodded and ran off.

Sören rocked his daughters in the bassinet on the floor as Dooku used the Force to pass a cup to each person before taking his seat and using the Force to float a cup over to himself. With an arm around Sören, soothing him - restraining him - Dooku took a sip of his tea and then he made a small sweeping gesture with his hand. "Why are you here?"

"We are leaving," Ingwion said. "We thought it was rude to just go without telling you first."

"Wait. You're..." Sören blinked and cocked his head to one side. Of all the business they could have possibly come here to state, Sören was not expecting that. "Leaving. So are you leaving Sydney leaving, or are you leaving this world leaving? Are you just going

away for awhile 'on business' -" Sören made air quotes. "And coming back, or are..."

"We're leaving this world for good," Flóki said. "We have some business to attend to elsewhere, and then... who knows."

"You can't just leave this world for good. Frankie's*pregnant* -" Rage rose in Sören like a flame, hot and stinging.

"It's not mine," Flóki said. "It's yours."

"First of all, you were fine with sharing her with me, so don't tell me now that's the problem -"

"No, it's not. Please don't put words in my mouth."

Sören put down his tea and clenched his fists. "Well, whether it's mine, yours, or Kanye Fucking West's, it *still doesn't matter*. She's your partner, you had a family, abandoning her when she's this far into her pregnancy is *shitty* -"

"Was my partner," Flóki said.

"You. You broke up with her?" *How dare you.* Sören found himself even angrier at this, and now Dooku's arm was in front of him rather than around him, as if holding him back from flying across the room and pummeling him. Something told Sören that unlike his scuff with Maglor last fall in Iceland, Flóki wouldn't let himself be beaten so easily. But he was still beyond furious, the urge to kill rising, and he could feel that echoed in Maglor and Ali, while it simmered in Dooku and Kenny.

"This is not our home," Flóki said. "This is not our world. We are of Asgard."

"And you're just going to up and leave Frankie just like that? Did you even offer to take her with you?"

"No," Flóki said.

"So is this what you two assholes do?" Sören didn't care that he was insulting gods - he himself felt insulted, enraged on his lover's behalf; in his mind's eye he could see Frankie weeping in the fetal position while Margrét held her, stone-faced. He was angry for Margrét too, but he knew Margrét was affected differently, better at masking her pain and "motoring through", a coping mechanism she'd learned after her turbulent twenties. "You fucking use people like playthings while you're here till you get bored with them?"

"I don't expect you to understand," Flóki said.

"You're right, because I bloody don't -"

Dooku held up a hand. While he was more reserved in his anger than Sören, he could feel it now across their bond, building like waves in a storm until at last the tidal wave would overtake them all. "So is that the sole nature of your business here? You came to inform us that you're leaving, and you're abandoning a pregnant woman who loved you?"

"And abandoning an oath you swore." Sören could have spat, remembering the oath of fealty Flóki had sworn to him last fall, in Iceland. "Do oaths mean nothing to you as well?"

"You no longer have need of us," Flóki said.

"Oh, I'm pretty sure Frankie still needs you," Sören said. "And I'm not so sure how you came to the conclusion that we no longer need you. The Doom is still upon us. We have not reunited with all of our lost family yet. And there is the matter of Odin -"

"What exactly have you been doing with yourselves since I made you immortal?" Ingwion asked. "You speak of the Doom still being upon you. You have not gone after the Valar who put it there."

It was Dooku who answered. "In case you couldn't tell, there are more of them than there are of us. As you know, we may be Force sensitive, but we're not exactly in position yet to go to war with a small army of gods and, doubtless, their loyal followers."

Maglor spoke next, the fury rasping his voice. "Key word being yet. Our time will come, and the gods will fall."

"I'm sure you're well-preparing for that with... looking at cat memes on the Internet? Playing video games? Going for trips to the beach?" Ingwion scoffed.

"Jæja," Sören said, "don't sit here and thumb your nose at the modern world when you drive a Bentley, live in a mansion, wear Armani suits, and eat caviar and drink champagne like it's going out of style."

"It is something to pass the time in a colorless, boring world. And I have already ascended," Ingwion said.

"*You don't say.*" Sören was already done with this conversation - it was bad enough that they'd come here to announce they were abandoning the oath and abandoning Frankie, so casually and callously, it was another thing for them to come here and insult them under their roof. "God forbid we do something fun while we're here, as we're waiting for more of the pieces to come together that we need to take on Odin and the Valar. Nope, everything's gotta be serious business all the time, I guess."

Ingwion sat back in his chair. "Have you even thought of what it is you'll do once Odin and Valar are trampled under your feet - provided you actually get there. I gave you my blood, I gave you eternity. What are you planning on doing with it?"

Sören looked at Dooku, then at Maglor, then shrugged. "I think it's kind of stupid to sit here and speculate as to what I'll be doing fifty, two hundred, five hundred years from now. We never know what life will bring, and we have to take each day as it comes."

"That's just my point," Ingwion said. "Life. You seem to act as if you're going to keep living here in the modern world once what's done is done -"

"Is there a problem with that? Is there some kind of law now saying we can't?"

"Why not take the straight road home to Valinor, reclaim who you once were? Transfigure from these... Mortal bodies... into your old forms?"

"Wait wait, hold *up*," Ali said, and Sören heard Kenny *growl*. Ali folded her arms and shook her head. "Are you trying to insinuate that I should go back and just... just..." Ali was shaking now, tears spilling down her cheeks. "*Be white?*"

"Yeah," Kenny said, the anger flashing in his almond-shaped eyes. "That's fucking gross, dude."

"You know what else is gross?" Sören asked, fighting the urge to Force throw the coffee table at his guests. "You telling us to go back to Valinor. You *surely* know what it's like there. Even *when* the Valar are overthrown, it doesn't mean that suddenly everyone is automatically going to be OK with 'the gay'." Sören made air quotes, scowling. "And want to love and hug and sing kumbayah. Just like social reforms and a black president didn't make millions of right-wing nutjobs see the light over in the States, the reason why you haven't seen a revolution in Valinor all these eons is because there's enough Quendi perfectly fine and OK with the status quo, and who aren't going to be thrilled if we come back as our old selves, presuming that was even a thing we wanted to do. And if on the odd chance that you're *not* telling my cousin to go magic-bleach her skin, which I sincerely fucking hope you're not, *there are parts of Valinor where you can be shanked for having the wrong accent*, never mind being the only black Elf who ever lived. And speaking just for myself here, I was bored all the time, which is why I got into inventing and creating -"

"Just think of what you could create if you went back," Ingwion argued.

Sören gave him a pointed look, trying to communicate *you've got to be fucking kidding me* with his eyes. "Valinor was beautiful, our old forms were beautiful. But all that glitters is not gold - it was a gilded cage. I was fucking *miserable* in Valinor. When I rode off to face down Morgoth and the Balrogs, I did so knowing there was a chance I might die. And I had so very little else to lose."

"As you know, my own death was a suicide," Dooku said, nodding. "I knew I would not survive my battle with Morgoth. I wanted to take him down with me."

"And then we have Finarfin, who *you* killed." Sören sneered at Flóki, anger boiling in him again as his mind's eye replayed the vision in the palantir. "I told that idiot to stay his ass in Valinor and he of course couldn't just sit there and do nothing when it was time to fight the evil. But I also *felt* it in the palantir. All those years and years alone, without the brothers he loved. In a sham marriage, with children who mostly hated him for the choices he'd made. He, too, rode out knowing he was going to die. And you would have us go back to a place where we were so unhappy? Where the three of us Finwion brothers committed suicide to escape it? And Maedhros? You *really* think that just overthrowing the Valar is going to make us comfortable with being there again? Like we'd ever fucking feel *safe* there? Bullshit. Would you be happy if I told you to go to where Sauron and Melkor were keeping you, torturing you, even though they're gone now? In the universes where I lived with Justin Roberts, would you tell me to go live in the same flat even though he's dead now? Because this is literally what you're asking us, here, is to go back to where we suffered."

The two gods said nothing. Nor did Sören want to be argued with. Sören sipped his tea and shifted around in his seat. *Yeah. Thought so.*

But of course, they weren't done yet, and a moment later Ingwion spoke. "To me it was a pleasure to dwell among the Elves -"

"If you're talking about our family, then I'll give you that. But if you're talking about the Noldor as a whole, well... I didn't burn those damn ships for no reason, Ingwion." Sören gave a bitter laugh. "I suppose if that's what you mean, you have a pretty low bar, considering you hang out with fucking Odin."

And Sören felt the lash of anger as the memories of long ago flashed in his mind's eye - all the bitterness and the pain. All the *emptiness*, the beauty of the world and their forms a vanity, as if it were a sort of glamour to mask the imprisonment, the oppression, the

necessity of living a lie. And he was angry with the pain his grandson had been through, a life so full of abuse and torment that he could not see Valinor for what it was, the hell that Fëanor, Fingolfin and Finarfin had endured in this world a long time ago still looked like a step up for Ingwion, who could never go home again, being bound to Asgard. Even now, Sören knew that Ingwion was probably saying these hurtful things from a place of raw grief after the Dagorath, knowing it did not bode well for this world and the coming Ragnarök, wanting Freya back, so as angry as Sören was, there was sadness too; Sören pitied him. *It is such a strange thing, to pity a god.*

Ingwion glared. "You have been given an opportunity and you are *squandering* it -"

"No, I think not," Dooku said.

"You are," Ingwion continued on, "wasting your immortal lives here in this world, content to do... *nothing*..."

"As my husband said," Dooku said, his usual velvet voice now quietly menacing, "it seems rather that it's a double standard - you get to partake of the modern world and we do not?"

"I do not live a normal life," Ingwion said. "All of you just... trying to be normal, everyday *people*, it makes me *sick* -"

"None of us here are normal," Sören said. "If you think any of us in this room live a normal, everyday life, you haven't been paying attention."

"To the outside world, that is what it looks like -"

"And yet, you and I both know that is untrue. MI6 sure as *hell* knows that's untrue." Sören shook his head; he wished Anthony were here to see this and join in the arguing, but that would involve having to disclose certain things about the family that he wasn't ready for just yet. "Just because I don't want to go back to Valinor doesn't mean that I'm just going to live some normal, boring, mundane life here. Though I would argue that after the hell my family and I have all been through, perhaps we are entitled to have some calm, some *lack of adventure* for an eon or five. But you know me, Ingwion, and you should know better than to think that my life here would ever be ordinary. As a wise man once said, power is meant to be used, and -"

"Your power is limited here," Ingwion said. "In Valinor you would truly grow into power. Into glory. And though you are immortal now, or at least some of you..." He glanced over at Ali and Kenny, then back at Sören. "It is still not like your original forms. Your true forms."

"You know, mate," Ali said, "I've had about goddamn enough of you sitting there telling me to go be white again." Kenny nodded.

"I've had just about goddamn enough of you, period," Sören said. "You are my kin, but that doesn't give you a Get Out of Jail Free pass to just run your mouth like this in *my* home -"

Ingwion's eyes locked with his. "Yes, I *was* your brothers' kin... from when you were Fëanor."

Sören noticed the past tense, and knew that was very deliberate. "Still *am* Fëanor, just wearing a different body, and having had some additional experiences in this life which

have shaped me." Sören folded his hands and put them between his knees. He didn't know why he was continuing this conversation, why he wasn't asking them to leave. He closed his eyes for a few seconds and in his mind's eye he saw himself growing in power, wielding power. "And as Fëanor, as a creator, an inventor, I feel the worst possible thing I can do is try to go backwards, to the past. There is only moving forward, into something new. I am Fëanor, but I am more. I am evolving -"

"You are less than Fëanor," Ingwion scoffed. "Looking at you in your*human* forms, it is like you are accepting the yoke of the Valar, happiness in slavery -"

"As if they didn't have us under the yoke when we were in Elven form and living in Valinor?" Sören's anger flared afresh, thinking of the Valar's rule, the stifled lives he and his brothers were forced to live, Fingolfin and Finarfin forced to marry women they did not love and sire children on them. "Which of course, is why you stayed there to serve them like your father... oh wait, you didn't."

"I don't know how you can stand it," Ingwion said, turning to Maglor. "You could leave with us. Leave this world behind, leave these pretenders -"

Maglor raised an eyebrow. "You will watch what you say." Sören could feel him seething - the air around Maglor seemed to glow just a little brighter, the temperature in the room seeming to climb by degree. "He has already come here and insulted my father, my uncle, my sibling and cousin." Maglor shook his head and then his eyes met Ingwion's, like molten mercury. "Do you think I am so *shallow* as to not love them in the bodies they are in now? As if the glory of the Elves is the only thing making them worthy of love and respect, and not what lies here?" Maglor put his hand on his heart. "I have lived for a long time among Men, Ingwion, longer than my own kind."

"A tragedy," Ingwion offered. "It is well past time for you to come home."

"**This. Is. My. Home.**" Maglor's voice echoed as many voices at once. A shiver went through Sören, breaking out into gooseflesh. Maglor rose from his seat, fists clenched. "You do not *get it.* I have traveled the world many times over. I have sometimes had friends, lovers in my journeys. It is true that I have not had the easiest life, wandering the Earth over eons, never able to stay one place for long, the Mortal lifespan so short compared to mine, loving and losing. But I would have already tried to take the straight road and accept the judgment of the Valar, and punishment, a long time ago if I truly hated it here, just to be 'home' again. And back 'home' -" Maglor made air quotes and Sören couldn't help smiling a little; *like father, like son*. "Everybody looks the same. Everybody is forced to *be* the same." Maglor shook his head. "You say the modern world is so colorless, but I find the opposite is true - this world is much more interesting with all its different landscapes and cultures, its people much more beautiful in their diversity." Maglor gave Ali and Kenny a brief smile, who smiled back, before his face hardened again. "Maedhros is black now, and Ali is beautiful as she is. Fingon is Korean now, and Kenny is lovely as he is. There is nothing the matter with the way Sören looks, or Nicolae."

Sören looked out of the corner of his eye and saw Metallica and Megadeth were peeking in from the hallway, eavesdropping on everything, and they looked stricken. *Jesus, those kids,* Sören thought to himself, remembering Ali telling him how much shit her kids had gotten for being mixed-race.

Maglor went on, furious. "And you would say they are accepting the yoke of the Valar, but it feels more like resistance from here. Defiance. Refusing to let them win by hating themselves. They feel *more* like themselves, as they are now."

"You talked a good game about how beautiful you think I am, two summers ago," Sören said, "and clearly that was a fucking lie. And as far as insulting my family..." Sören shook his head at Ingwion and made a noise of disgust. "I wish I knew what a racist you were before I stuck my dick in it. I wouldn't have."

"I'm not a racist," Ingwion said. "I hate everyone equally."

There was a time when Sören would have found that amusing, but today was not that time, seeing the hurt in his cousin's eyes - the cousin who had been kept from him his entire life because his guardians didn't approve of his uncle having married an Aboriginal woman. He reached out for her free hand, and squeezed. Once again, he felt awful that Ali and Kenny's kids were seeing this.

"I have no problem with black people," Ingwion said, "or Asians, or any race of Mortal. There are Pagans of all different races who call on the name of Freyr now-"

"'I'm not racist! I have black friends!' Said every racist person ever," Kenny said, making a face. He shook his head. "Just quit while you're ahead, asshole."

"So," Dooku said, and cleared his throat. He made a gesture for Maglor to sit down, but he would not. Dooku and Maglor looked at each other for a moment, then Dooku glanced at their guests again, an expression on his face as if he'd smelled something foul. "This conversation isn't going anywhere productive. Is there anything *actually useful or important* that you need to tell us before you leave?"

"Ecthelion lives," Ingwion said. "We went into the past, and rescued him from the Balrogs."

Maglor sat down, and his jaw dropped. Sören teared up, hearing a sob come out of himself. He shook, weeping. As angry as he was with his now-ex-lover for coming here and insulting them like this, he was grateful for this, and relieved, feeling a surge of his love for his kin. "Oh my god," Sören whispered. "Thank you. Thank you..." Then he quickly snapped out of it as he realized. “You didn't rescue Ara?”

“No,” Ingwion said. “Just Ecthelion.”

Maglor pinched the bridge of his nose. “Well, at least there's that. Would you be so kind as to tell us where my son is -"

"He was sent through the portal into another universe," Ingwion said. "You will never see him again, but at least he is alive."

Something snapped in Sören's head. It was one thing for Flóki to abandon Frankie and Margrét so coldly and callously, it was another thing for Ingwion to insult him like this, and the non-white members of his family, another thing to rescue Ecthelion just to send him away to never reunite with this world's Maglor.

You would hurt what is mine. You have no right.

It was like having the Silmarils stolen all over again – he could feel Maglor's heart breaking, could hear the unvoiced screams...

You would hurt what is mine. You would hurt what is mine. Mine. Mine. Mine...

Maglor sat there, open-mouthed, shaking, and then all he could say was "*You.*" He was all wrath again; Sören braced himself as he watched Maglor ready to spring - felt ready to spring himself. "***Why would you do that?***" Maglor's voice rang out as a thousand voices once more.

"You are not worthy of your son," Ingwion said. He pointed to Sören. "*That* is an abomination, deplorable, an Elf refusing to be what he is. And you..." He turned back to Maglor. "You live this sorry excuse for a life, with these paltry Mortals -"

At Maglor's side, Huan growled.

"**That's it.**" Maglor got up, but before he could charge Ingwion, Sören found himself waving his hand and, with the Force, Sören flung Ingwion in his seat, all the way through the glass door that led to the garden, which shattered, glass crashing around the god as the chair toppled in the back yard and Ingwion was thrown to the ground. Sören clenched his fist and Ingwion was flung several feet up into the air. Sören stopped himself before he started to choke him - he didn't think it would kill Ingwion anyway, but he let Ingwion float there for a moment, frozen, unable to wrest out of his grip with the Force.

Flóki rose to his feet and Maglor stepped in front of him, eyes wild. "*Do not*," Maglor gritted out. Huan growled, and then began to bark.

For a moment there was just silence, all eyes on Sören, and Ingwion continuing to float off the ground. At last Sören spoke, and he heard himself speak in a voice different from his own, in a language he did not speak in this life, yet his soul remembered it from before. "**Get thee gone.**"

Sören saw the air around him glowing as if he were wearing the crown of Silmarils; he could feel himself burning, as if he had a fever. Maglor and Dooku both looked at him - and then each other - with surprise. The glowing quickly faded, while the feverish feeling remained, and for the briefest instant Sören was afraid that Ingwion and Flóki would retaliate, that one or both of the gods would simply snap their fingers and torch their entire house and them with it, burning as Ecthelion almost had at the hands of the Balrogs. But instead Ingwion got up, reflexively brushed himself off, and then he and Flóki walked out together, not saying a word, not looking back.

Ali broke down sobbing. Metallica and Megadeth went to her, hugging their mother.

"That was a bad man," Megadeth said.

"He was a cunt. Can we go kick his arse?" Metallica asked.

Ali laughed so hard she snorted, and Kenny facepalmed before tousling their mullets.

"In case you couldn't tell those are Maedhros's kids..." Maglor shook his head, chuckling.

Now Sören was hugging Ali fiercely. "I'm so sorry," Sören said, shedding silent tears of his own. "I'm so, so, so fucking sorry."

"You know, I want to say I'm used to it," Ali said, with a bitter smile. "But it feels so much worse, coming from him." Ali blinked. "What the hell even did you say to him? I assume that was Quenya -"

"He told him to get out," Maglor said, nodding. "In true Fëanor style. You know, Ada, he can deal with people hating him. But you saying you pity him..."

"I pity the fool," Sören said.

Ali started laughing again. Laughing and crying. And then just crying. Kenny was crying now too. They were all crying - Dooku, Maglor too.

"And you." Kenny reached out and put a hand on Maglor's shoulder. "Sending your son away like that -"

"I had lost all hope of seeing him a long time ago," Maglor said softly. "For a brief while, I had hope that... he would be reborn, that I would see him again. I should have known better than to get my hopes up. At least he is alive, somewhere."

"We could use the portal and try to look for him?" Sören asked, knowing how much this *hurt* Maglor.

"Not unless we knew exactly where he was, in what universe," Maglor said, "otherwise it's too dangerous to go... hopping universes. My son is important to me, but I will not abandon the family I have here." Maglor glowered then, eyes darkening with rage. "Unlike some people."

"Yeah." Sören felt a shudder of revulsion, thinking about how Flóki could just leave Frankie like that. He was tempted to call her and see if she was OK, but something told him to wait.

Sören felt Dooku stand up, and then Sören felt the weight of his stare. Sören looked up, and over, and saw Dooku wasn't staring at him, but what had become of the patio door, and the armchair that had been thrown through it, resting in the grass of the back yard.

"Er," Sören said. "I'm sorry."

"I'm not," Dooku said.

"I'll find the list Anthony gave us of contact numbers, so we can get a repairman over here," Maglor said, getting up. "Tell the repairman we had, uh, a wild party or something."

"Something like that," Sören said, and Ali shook her head, snickering and scowling. Then she started crying again, and Sören cried with her.

Fuck this day. Fuck this entire year. Fuck my life.

—

That night, Sören lay awake, sandwiched between Maglor and Dooku. Usually he didn't have a lot of trouble sleeping snuggled up with the two men he loved, and the cats purring away at the foot of the bed - it was so cozy - but to say that today had been a rough day would be a gross understatement.

Sören finally couldn't take it anymore, feeling restless. Feeling *uneasy.* He crawled over Dooku, who made a noise in his sleep, and went to the bathroom. On his way to check on the girls in the nursery, his blood went cold, finally realizing why he felt uneasy.

Sören swallowed hard. *If he can go back in time and prevent Ecthelion from being killed*

by Balrogs, he can go back in time and do other things... he can hurt us elsewhere...

"Oh god." Sören felt like he was going to vomit. "Oh god. Oh god..."

No, came a sudden voice in his head, male, resonant.*He will not. He* cannot. *So be it.*

And then a warm touch of light - then a warmer touch, like stepping into a bubble of pure heat, hot hot hot, air sizzling around him - before it went away.

Sören's eyebrows raised. "What."

The girls needed changing, and after they were changed, Sören gave them formula and rocked them, sitting with his thoughts. He felt like he was made of lead, the weight of his broken heart. The weight of the knowledge that to Ingwion he had meant nothing at all, really. That Ingwion had indeed lied to him about finding him beautiful and good and worthy, or perhaps he had once but something had changed, a sort of festering wound from the Dagorath.

Sören felt the tears come, but he did not want to disturb his daughters. And he did not want to give into them - he did not want to sink back into the abyss where he had been after the Dagorath in that other universe, especially now that he had children, but even more than that, he was damned if he would let himself feel like this over *that*. Sören remembered his parting words to Ingwion that last time they'd had sex. *"I am not your fuckboy, you will not treat me this way."* Sören grit his teeth now, feeling that steel in him, beaten on the anvil of his heart in the fire of his anger. *He does not get to have power over me. In the end, he was just another person who used me.*

But it still hurt, much as Sören did not want it to, much as it injured Sören's pride on top of the blows Ingwion and Flóki had dealt to be hurting like this, close to tears. And when the girls were back in their cribs, Sören found himself getting his phone, not thinking, just feeling. He hit the speed dial for Anthony's number.

Two rings and then a sleep-husky, "Anthony Hewlett-Johnson."

"Hi Anthony. Sorry to bother you at this hour -"

A sharp exhale. "Sören. It's three AM. What's going on?"

Sören needed a practical reason for the call; he bit his lip as he fought back the*I wanted to hear your voice.* Within a few seconds, a practical reason came to him. Though it seemed like there was some sort of guardian presence protecting him and his family from any negative interference from Ingwion across the multiverse, Sören thought of how Ingwion had sacked Ali after Ali brought Sören to the mansion, and he had concerns on a more material level now. "Huge favor, or set of favors, to ask you, and I need it now, I'm sorry."

"OK." Anthony made a grouchy noise and then he said, "What can I do for you?"

Come over here and fuck me senseless. But Anthony was Mortal and Sören was afraid of getting attached - *oh god, Ingwion and Flóki's blood, nobody else can be immortal now.* That, too, sent a chill through him.

"I'm waiting, Sören."

Sören pulled himself together, trying not to think of the horror of Ali, Kenny, Frankie and

Margrét, and *his own children*, being denied immortality. He swallowed hard. "OK. First of all, I need you to look at my bank accounts and make sure I still have money."

"When you say 'bank accounts', do you mean just some of them, or -"

"No, I mean all of them. I have access to the smaller personal account, if I needed that I wouldn't be calling you. I mean everything. Including the backup reserve accounts."

"Shit. Let me get my laptop."

"I'll hold."

Sören waited and heard Anthony typing, breathing. He was absolutely on edge, hoping Ingwion hadn't depleted all his funds and left him and his family with nothing. He wished Ingwion had never had access to any of those accounts to funnel money into.

"Everything's in there," Anthony said several minutes later.

Sören breathed a small sigh of relief. "OK, here's the other part of the favor. I need you to set up a separate account, or accounts, and transfer *everything*, I mean fucking everything, from the current accounts into the new accounts, and Ingmar Borovkov is not to have access to the accounts whatsoever. Just you, myself, Marcus and Nico, that's it."

"May I ask why -"

"It's a long *fucking* story and it's three in the morning, I'll tell you in-person if you want to come over tomorrow. In the meantime, this can't wait, I need you to do this right fucking now." While Ingwion had enough decency for the money to still be in there, Sören didn't know if that would last - if it was truly decency or just an error of oversight on Ingwion's part. Sören resented that this was even necessary - he didn't think it was fair to gift something to somebody, the way Ingwion had gifted them with enough money to be set for a very long lifespan, and take it away like that, and he hoped Ingwion *wasn't* that way, but he wasn't going to take any chances. Ingwion had destroyed that good faith, that trust.

It was shattering, to go from thinking of him as someone who could be trusted, someone who was looking out for them, and now think of him as a possible predator. And Sören hoped that Ingwion wouldn't go there. But today had changed everything.

"O...K. Hold again while I get everything set up."

Sören waited. He watched the girls sleep, shifting his weight from one foot to the other, feeling keyed up in a way that he hadn't since he was dating Justin Roberts. He fought back the urge to tell Anthony to come out now so he could tell the horror story in person - *stop being so attached*.

Finally Anthony said, "OK Sören, it's a go. When I come over tomorrow I'll give you all the account information and we can talk. Because yes, you bloody well are going to tell me why I'm doing this at three in the sodding morning."

"Ingmar Borovkov doesn't know we had this conversation, you won't tell him or anyone in a position to tell him," Sören said, and then he *pushed* with the Force - something he hated doing, it always hit his issues about consent - but in this case he considered it necessary to protect his family.

Usually the person being pushed would respond back with an acknowledgment; Sören

was waiting for the *"Ingmar Borovkov doesn't know we had this conversation, I won't tell him, or anyone in a position to tell him."* And instead, Sören blinked involuntarily, head starting to ring, feeling a slight, quick pressure like he'd been pushed back.

"Got it," Anthony said. "Is there more, or can I go back to sleep now."

"You can go back to bed," Sören said, wondering what the hell happened with the push. *Oh god, I hope Ingwion didn't take my powers...*Sören stared at the formula bottle and gave a slight wave of his hand, and the bottle floated over to him. *Thank fuck.*

"What time do you want me to come tomorrow?"

"Not before noon." Not only was Sören not a morning person, but since it was three AM and he was still awake, he was probably going to need to sleep until at least ten or eleven provided he could even get to sleep when he got back in bed. "Maybe around two? That gives me enough time to get ready."

"Two o'clock it is. And Sören... are you safe right now. Do you feel you're in danger from... well, Ingmar."

"I don't know," Sören said truthfully. "For the moment, probably not." He thought of the touch again, the light and the warmth, the powerful voice. He hoped that wasn't just a trick of his mind, or something lying to him.

"Shit. Do you need me to come over now?"

"It can probably wait until tomorrow afternoon."

"Kayyyyy." Anthony didn't sound entirely convinced. "Well, good night then, Sören. Be safe."

"*Takk*, Anthony. You too." Then Sören realized how idiotic that sounded, and facepalmed.

Anthony chuckled. "Night."

Chapter 12

When Sören had called in the middle of the night and told him to come at two the next day, Anthony had thought that rather late to discuss business that seemed urgent, but as things happened, Anthony's entire morning was occupied by a giant catastrophe that seemed related to why Sören had called at that hour, and by two Anthony had *just* gotten finished handling it.

Mostly.

Sören was waiting outside for him, wearing a Nine Inch Nails T-shirt and black cargo shorts. There were glasses of lemonade ready in the house when Anthony took a seat in the armchair, Sören's three cats coming over to him, purring loudly.

"I'm sorry about last night," Sören said.

"Well," Anthony said, "you're going to love this."

Sören's eyebrow went up.

"Ingmar Borovkov is dead. Killed in a gas explosion."

"'Dead'." Sören made air quotes. "He faked his own death."

"Yes." Anthony nodded. "'Dead.'" He also made air quotes. "I know how I know, but how would *you* know?" Anthony locked eyes with Sören.

"Because *I know*." Sören narrowed his eyes. "He came by yesterday to say he was leaving this world for good. The individual he was leaving with has... a particular talent for pyrokinesis. And Ingmar's not human, but he's... more than not human. Not something you can just kill so easily. So no, he's not dead." Sören shook his head and leaned back against the couch. "He just faked his death so he could fuck off out of here. The way your agency has faked deaths for other people before, except clearly he didn't ask for your help this time."

There was a long silence, as Anthony considered that information. He could tell Sören wasn't lying, and had enough of a history with the man to speak with some authority - anger once again flared in him as he felt the hurt Sören was trying very hard not to broadcast, more intense than the last time this subject had come up.

"And now, a question for a question. How do you know?" Sören folded his arms.

"We monitor specific landmarks around the world. Stonehenge, Avebury, Dimmuborgir, Teotihuacán, Uluru -"

"The portals."

Anthony nodded. "He and another gentleman, known to you as Flóki, were seen leaving through one of the portals after the report of the gas explosion and the fake dead body."

"That's pretty final," Sören said. "I hope he won't come back." Sören squinted. Sören closed his eyes and for a moment Anthony could hear the unvoiced internal screaming, the cry of *Father*, and then Sören opened his eyes, which were too bright. Anthony didn't

know what the context of that was, but he ached for Sören just the same. "Dare I ask what is to become of his company? Is it under new ownership?" Sören cocked his head to one side.

"No," Anthony said. "I had an entire clusterfuck this morning when the news dropped, because myself and several other agents from our department that MI6 doesn't officially have, were listing Borovkov Enterprises as our employer, and sometimes we used their services - like transporting you lot from Uluru to Sydney last year. I was on the books as human resources."

Sören snorted, shaking with silent laughter. "The irony being you deal with non-humans and... well, more-than-humans."

"Yes," Anthony said, managing a smile at that. "The irony of that wasn't lost on me, either." He grinned. "One of our fixers was listed as waste management."

Sören laughed harder. Then Sören quickly sobered. "So wait... the company's just... gone now?"

Anthony nodded. "There's a rush to buy up equipment, trucks, headhunting certain branches of workers - Tesla, Microsoft, and Google, unsurprisingly, are in a bit of a war over that. But as far as our agents go, I had to scramble to find another way to cover our arses, new 'official' employers for everyone, and that took my entire morning, starting not so long after you called, in fact." Anthony sighed. “Let me give you the information for your new accounts.”

Anthony sat next to Sören on the couch - dangerously aware of the physical proximity, breathing in his scent, feeling his warmth, tingling with the beginnings of arousal. He opened his laptop and they spent the next while going over Sören's accounts. Then Anthony said, "Even though I suppose I don't *need* to know what happened with you and Borovkov for the sake of having context on future dealings with my 'employer', and whether or not you're in any danger from him, I still want to know anyway."

Sören sighed. "It's a lot."

"I'm sure it is."

"No, Anthony, I don't just mean that 'it's a long story' or 'it's complicated'. I mean... it's more complicated than you even know, and it goes back a long, long, long, long, long time, longer than you know. It's not entirely my business to tell, so for me to tell you all of it, I... I can't. Someday I might, when we've known each other longer, and if the rest of the family... well... we have to have some meetings about what is safe to tell you, I realize that sounds daft considering your entire job is dealing with the weirdest of the weird shit but this goes above and beyond anything you already know and..." Sören shook his head.

"All right." Anthony felt a touch of disappointment, but he respected Sören's position on it. He knew that even though MI6 *was* on their side, Marcus Lauer aka Mark Lowry had a very bad experience with the Americans during the 1970s and if nothing else, he was wary of government agents and Anthony couldn't fault him for that, nor Sören's consideration for his partners' feelings and sense of safety.

And that, too, made Anthony like him even more - that care, that protectiveness.

Fuck.

"But what I can tell you is this," Sören said. "He broke my heart. He was gone for awhile, 'taking care of business', and now he left again, going back where he comes from, which isn't this world -"

"I'd got that. We do know about the portals."

"And either he never really cared about me at all except as a hole to fuck, or he got spooked by something that happened last year and that made him see me that way, but that was how he treated me. He came over yesterday not just to tell us he was leaving, but he put us down, he was a fucking prick. He made Ali cry."

"Ali?" Anthony couldn't believe it - she seemed so tough.

Sören nodded, and Anthony felt the anger in Sören, even angrier than what had been done to himself, he was angry for Ali and Kenny, and he was angry for Marcus. Anthony looked at what used to be the glass door leading out to the back yard, which had a board up as it was waiting for repair, and Anthony realized Sören did that; once in awhile Anthony experienced something his department classified as psychometry, where he could see something in his mind's eye that had happened with an object or a place. Now he saw Sören throwing Ingmar Borovkov in a chair through the glass door. Anthony shivered. *Hell hath no fury like a woman or man scorned, but fury hath no hell like Sören Sigurðsson when his family has been scorned.* And instead of being afraid of Sören, it made Anthony feel wistful, wanting to be let in closer, wanting...

No. Stop that.

"I know his trauma is messing with his head," Sören went on. "I feel sorry for him. I know he *hurts.* But it doesn't excuse things. And until you came over with the news that he faked his death and has fucked off out of here, yes, I was afraid that he would retaliate in some way, since I'm not going to just *roll over* and take his shit - I've done that enough in my life, with enough people - and he acts like mortals are scum just for existing and well... you've read mythology, I'm sure. You've read stories of gods punishing mortals for their 'hubris'." Sören made air quotes again, a look of disgust on his face.

"It's why I don't do religion," Anthony said. "People give their worship to tyrants, then they enact tyranny on other humans. Religion is a cancer on humanity."

"Thank you," Sören said. "Well... you met a god."

"*Jesus Christ.*"

"No, he's not Jesus Christ."

Something about Sören's answer to that tickled Anthony, and he couldn't help laughing, and Sören laughed with him. "He's not the Messiah! He's a very naughty boy!" Sören said, then he sobered, looking even angrier than before. Anthony hated how devastatingly sexy Sören looked when he was pissed off like that. *Stop being attractive.*

"I don't believe in gods," Anthony said.

"The Norse called him Freyr."

Anthony did a double take. Then he reiterated what he said, feeling like his grasp on reality was slipping, needing to reinforce his worldview. "I don't. Believe. In. Gods."

"Call him whatever you want, then, but he has the power of one. And even though he *has* departed this world, apparently, and that puts my mind a ease a little, I'm still... gonna be looking over my shoulder for awhile." Sören sighed. "You know, like I wasn't already fucking doing that enough with what happened to Dag. I'm *not* quite mortal, Ingmar made me immortal, but that just means I can't age anymore and I'm harder to kill, not that I can't be killed outright. And there are worse things to do to someone than killing them. So... yeah. Maybe he won't do anything just by virtue of, uh... stuff I don't want to get into right now, but who the fuck knows."

"I'm sorry."

"Yeah, me too."

Silence hung between them. Anthony once again felt the urge to hug Sören. Living in fear of your ex-partner was one of the worst feelings in the world - not that he knew what that was like; he'd never had a serious relationship before, but he'd seen things. "We'll continue to monitor the portals to see if he arrives," Anthony said quietly, "and as soon as I know anything, you'll know something, and I'll send security backup -"

"You could send an entire army, if they're not like me, it won't matter."

I'll send my bloody self. Anthony stopped himself from saying it aloud just in time, but he knew as soon as that sentence had risen in his consciousness - he definitely, undeniably, had feelings. It wasn't just lust, it wasn't just a crush. He was starting to fall for Sören, all soulful brown eyes and warmth and fierce heart. If he had any sense, he'd be telling MI6 he was too emotionally compromised for this assignment - having feelings for the person you were supposed to protect *and* keep out of trouble could complicate that job significantly - and the thought of walking away from Sören, *especially* now, didn't sit well with him.

Anthony sighed.

Sören closed his eyes again and Anthony felt it once more - the internal screaming, crying out *Father*, Sören's mind showing the man with long white hair walking away from him forever. Anthony swallowed hard, wishing there was something, anything he could do to make it stop, ease the pain...

Huan came over to greet Anthony, standing on his shoulders, licking up his face, then licked Sören's face too. Then Huan whined, looking at the door, and back at Sören.

"He has to go out," Sören said, and gave an apologetic little smile.

"A walk would be nice," Anthony said.

"OK. Let me get the girls ready and I'll meet you at the door."

Sören woke Kate and Tori from their nap, and once they were settled in their stroller, Sören wheeled them out, letting Anthony take the dog's leash as he wheeled his own daughters.

It was a beautiful Wednesday afternoon in early May. Australia was having fall now, winter would be here soon, and while Sydney was still warm, it wasn't ridiculous like it had been a couple of months ago. Anthony appreciated the green of the neighborhood trees, the blue of the sky. A small family of kangaroos bounded through in the distance and Sören *squeaked*, which Anthony found delightful and adorable.

"Ali says they're pests but I'll never get tired of seeing them," Sören said.

"They're cute," Anthony said. "I like them too."*And your reaction is even cuter. God damn you.*

Huan did his business, and Sören paced around, looking fidgety and restless. Anthony could feel the wheels spinning, Sören's frustration at the situation he was in - something Anthony knew he'd just barely skimmed the surface of, but he wasn't going to pry deeper just yet. Anthony once again felt that urge to do something, make it better somehow, and then he had an idea.

"Do you want to go somewhere?" Anthony asked.

Sören raised an eyebrow. "Such as..."

Anthony shrugged. "Sydney Harbour, maybe. I don't mind taking the girls and the dog." Having a dog in his Audi would be a first, but since Huan had just gone to the bathroom he imagined it would be safe.

"OK, sure, I like looking at the Harbour."

Sören fetched spare car seats from the house and then they loaded the girls and Huan into Anthony's slate grey Audi A7. "Nice ride," Sören said.

The drive to Sydney Harbour was uneventful; Anthony put on Jamiroquai and they drove with the windows down, a nice breeze coming in. Sören looked out the window, watching the city roll by, and Anthony stole glances at him every now and again, not able to help himself. Even troubled, Sören was lovely to look at.

There was a park by the bridge with a gorgeous view of the Opera House, and they went there. Huan was happy, tongue lolling, tail wagging, and the girls cooed, and Sören gave the appearance of being calmer, even though Anthony knew it was only ever slightly so and wouldn't last long. Anthony watched the sparkling water and he nudged Sören, pointing at a tall ship. "There's the Søren Larsen."

Sören smiled. "How do you know?"

"My father used to build ships in bottles. So by the time I was a teenager I knew way more about different ships, and their histories, than I ever wanted to." Anthony smiled back. "It's probably contributed to why I went into the Navy."

"Oh... you were in the Royal Navy?"

Anthony nodded solemnly.

"Ahoy, sailor," Sören said, and Anthony facepalmed, chuckling. Then Sören cocked his head to one side. "Do you miss it? Being at sea, I mean. I. Ah. I imagine you were at sea a lot."

"I commanded a sub, actually."

"Did you now." Sören crinkled his nose and bit his lower lip.

Anthony realized Sören's mind went right into the gutter - he also realized Sören had

submissive tendencies, broadcasting his enjoyment of being spanked for a split second before the shielding went back up. Anthony's cock stirred. As it happened, he had dominant tendencies, and his mind entertained the fantasy of tying Sören up and teasing him, making him forget everything that was wrong and beg to be fucked, and then Anthony shoved those delicious thoughts away as far as he could, knowing he was going farther and farther over the line every second.

"You don't often talk about your background," Sören said.

"That's because a lot of it is classified." Even now, Anthony made sure that there weren't eavesdroppers. There were a few other people in the park, but all a safe distance away.

"Hence your current job, I take it."

"Hence my current job." Anthony nodded.

"I'm still curious," Sören said. "You intrigue me."

"You intrigue me too," Anthony admitted. "But just like there's things you're concerned about sharing with me for one reason or another, I have the same concern about sharing certain things with you."

"Well, I might open up down the road."

"I'd prefer that you did. Not just because I want to get to know you, but." Anthony exhaled sharply, trying to phrase this delicately just in case, continuing to monitor the other people in the park. "Whatever happened with you and... Ingmar. The things you're not telling me, the context you're leaving out. If you are in fact on the shit list of someone you consider, well..."

"A god," Sören whispered.

Anthony nodded. "I need to know as much as possible about the situation, what I don't know, I can't help you with. I know you think maybe I *can't* help you against someone like him, or any other enemies you have -"

"I have quite a few of those," Sören said, looking back out at the Harbour, and up at the sky.

Oh shit, what have I gotten myself into."But you'd be surprised."

Sören shrugged. "Again, not entirely my business to tell, and it gets into really crazy shit."

"Crazy Shit is my middle name."

"No it's not."

Anthony chuckled. "No, it's not."

"What is your middle name, anyway?"

"Anthony."

Sören snorted. "So you're Anthony Anthony? Is that the new Moon Moon?" Then Anthony heard him broadcast *Fin Fin?* but for whatever reason Sören didn't say it aloud, and

Anthony wondered about it, probably some in-joke he wouldn't get.

"My given name is Cornelius," Anthony said.

Sören's eyes widened, and then he covered his mouth, and Anthony could tell he was trying not to laugh.

"Yes, this is exactly why I go by Anthony," Anthony said.

"I'm sorry. I shouldn't laugh -"

"No, you shouldn't, considering your name resembles an IKEA product."

Now Sören's laughter rang out, and a couple people *did* look at them. Anthony got them walking again, farther out of sight. "I just..." Sören shook his head. "Who looks at a tiny little baby and says 'Cornelius would be a great name?'"

"My mum." Anthony felt a touch of wistfulness, missing his mother, many kilometers away, on another hemisphere. "My mother is... a character."

"Sounds like you yourself are also a character, to be honest."

"I'm not sure if that's a compliment or not."

"Mostly." There was a glint of mischief in Sören's brown eyes.

Then Sören's phone went off. Sören jumped, startled, and Anthony watched as the phone flew out of his pocket, with Sören catching it as it rose to his hip. Anthony looked around again, paranoid that they were seen, but people were still minding their own business. Anthony did spot two new arrivals in the park out of the corner of his eye: two young white men, Anthony guessed them to be late teens or early twenties.

"I have to take this," Sören said, and Anthony nodded. Sören mouthed "Frankie" and then he said, "Mary! Hey, babe." Frankie, as part of the emergency move the family did late last year, was now going by her given name, Mary, in public, and since one could not be too careful that extended to the phone.

Anthony tried to not eavesdrop on Sören's conversation, and threw a stick for Huan to chase after. Something poked Anthony to look at the new arrivals again, and Anthony had learned over the years to obey that instinct. He now noticed one of the two young men had a buzz cut and the other had a shaved head. Both dressed in unremarkable T-shirts and jeans, smoking cigarettes, kicking a hacky sack back and forth. Normally Anthony wouldn't think anything of it, but then he saw that one of them had an obnoxious "1488" tattoo on his arm and Anthony cringed and fought the urge to go over there and punch a Nazi. *My grandfather didn't fight for England in World War II so your mum or dad could raise you to be such a disgusting twat,* Anthony thought to himself, feeling his anger boiling.

The presence of one neo-nazi and probably, two, in the park set off Anthony's internal alarm, but he kept himself calm as Sören lost his - Anthony couldn't help but hear Frankie's voice rising on the other end of the call, though it was muffled, and Sören himself was trying not to cry in public and failing. "I know, *elskan.* I know he's gone. I know. I'm so sorry. I'm sorry he broke your heart..."

It should be elske *if you're pretending to be Danish*, Anthony's inner linguist complained,

but he wasn't going to interrupt the call with something like that. Sören was shaking with tears now, his voice starting to blubber, and that caught the attention of the young man with the "1488" tattoo, looking in their direction, and Anthony saw him mouth to the other one, "Look at this f****t."

Anthony's fists clenched. Of course, he wasn't going to go over there and punch them just for saying a slur, if only because MI6 or not, he didn't want a police incident, but Anthony felt himself on guard as the other youth watched, and the two of them laughed at Sören crying.

"God, I know. I know, I'm sorry," Sören sobbed. "This is so fucked up. This is so*fucking* fucked up but Fra - Mary, I swear to you, I'm not going anywhere, you still have me, you still have Maarja, we're not going to leave you. I love you, I know she loves you, and *damn him* for what he did to you, I hope he fucking rots..."

Anthony's heart went out to Sören, and though he didn't know Frankie well and he got the sense Frankie was uncomfortable with his obvious privilege, she seemed like a decent person, and she didn't deserve to be abandoned by Flóki, especially not while very pregnant. Sören stopped being able to make words and just cried, and Anthony could hear Frankie crying on the other end of the phone.

The two idiots some meters away were laughing. *Does it make you feel like big men, laughing at another human being in pain? Fucking filth.* Anthony could feel himself getting angrier and angrier, pushed to his tipping point.

Then Kate began squalling in the stroller, and Tori with her - they had been peaceful and cooing happily at the Harbour, but their father's agitation was getting to them. Sören's eyes widened with alarm. "Oh shit. I have to go, the girls are crying. I'll... I'll come with you to your exam on Friday, OK? I love you. So much. I love you too, ja. Bye."

Sören ended the call, shoved the phone back in his pocket, and dropped to his knees. "Oh, baby. Oh, sweet babies, don't cry..."

Kate just cried harder, and Sören was trying to pull himself together and failing, obviously in greater distress now that his daughters were also in distress.

Sören sat on the grass and reached out to pet them. Then he got up, pulled his baby sling out of the stroller, scooped them one at a time out of the stroller, and put them in the sling, rocking them, and began to sing:

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

Sören had a husky, bluesy tenor like an R&B singer, pleasant to listen to, and the sweetness of his voice just made Anthony flutter again, even with his hurt for Sören and now, the way his daughters were screaming, and his concern over the two idiots watching the scene. Instead of calming down, Kate started shrieking, and Tori was also in hysterics, and Sören looked up with such pain in his eyes that it made Anthony want to cry too.

"They usually like it when I sing to them..."

Anthony had no idea what the hell he was doing, but he found himself taking Tori out of the sling and holding her - just holding one baby felt strange, he didn't know how Sören could handle both of them at once - and without thinking about it, Anthony heard himself start to sing, shyly.

Baby shark, doo, doo, doo, doo, doo, doo
Baby shark, doo, doo, doo, doo, doo, doo
Baby shark, doo, doo, doo, doo, doo, doo
Baby shark

Sören giggled and Anthony felt a touch of relief - he would give anything to make Sören laugh, when he was like that. Anthony bounced Tori a little as he sang, and Sören bounced Kate too, and then Sören sang the next part of the song, continuing to bounce his daughter.

Mommy shark, doo, doo, doo, doo, doo, doo
Mommy shark, doo, doo, doo, doo, doo, doo
Mommy shark, doo, doo, doo, doo, doo, doo
Mommy shark

Anthony couldn't help smiling; Sören singing that was adorable. Anthony continued with the next verse, now swinging Tori around - the girls had stopped crying and were doing a little clap in time to the song.

Daddy shark, doo, doo, doo, doo, doo, doo
Daddy shark, doo, doo, doo, doo, doo, doo
Daddy shark, doo, doo, doo, doo, doo, doo
Daddy shark

"We don't have Grandma Shark here," Sören said, and the sadness returned to his eyes - *Mamma*, Sören broadcasted, and then *oh my fucking god, her birthday was yesterday and I forgot with everything going on.*

Just for that alone, Anthony wanted to cry. He imagined Ingmar's repudiation was bad enough, to do it on Sören's dead mother's birthday...

"Or Grandpa," Anthony said, and desperately reaching for levity, added "as you know." Sören managed a little smile at that.

"Yeah, Grandpa Shark's at the restaurant." Sören snickered. He booped Kate's nose, then Tori's. "You better now?"

"Ra. Ra," Tori said, and reached out like Anthony had an invisible wig and she was tugging on it. "Ara."

"Ra ra ra," Kate said.

"Shark," Tori said.

Sören's eyebrows shot up and Anthony's jaw dropped. "Is that her first word?" Anthony asked.

"Besides mama and dada, ja." Sören nodded.

"Wow," Anthony said, impressed.

"Fin," Kate said. "Fin fin fin fin fin."

"Yes, sharks have fins," Anthony said, and chucked her chin approvingly. "Your daughters are smart," Anthony said to Sören.

"They get that from their actual dad," Sören said with a wistful sigh, and Anthony knew he was thinking of Dag.

"It runs in the family, I bet," Anthony said. "I know you went to med school."

Sören shrugged again. "If I was smart I wouldn't have fallen for, well, you know." Sören walked back to the stroller and put Kate in, and Anthony handed Tori to Sören and watched as Sören put her in the stroller. Then, once Sören's arms were free, Anthony found himself pulling Sören into a hug, resting Sören's head on his shoulder.

"It's OK," Anthony soothed. He began to rub Sören's back. "It's all right..."

But it wasn't all right. Anthony's instincts snapped him to attention and he saw the two youths were making a beeline for them. Sören felt the disturbance too and pulled back, and took a few steps backward to get in front of the stroller, shielding it with his body.

"Well, well," the young man with the "1488" tattoo said, and spat. "What do we have here?"

"A little boy who needs to go home to his mummy," Anthony said, and then sneered at the tattoo and added, "And perhaps needs to go back to school as well and relearn history."

"Yeh, that's cute, mate," the young man said. "At least I have a mum... and a dad." He glared at Sören. "Fuckin' f**s, raisin' kids together, you're probably goddamn perverts..."

They think we're a couple. Anthony briefly wondered how obvious his attraction to Sören was, but then, to two homophobes who were clearly deeply insecure in their toxic masculinity, he supposed any two random men who happened to be out with children looked like a gay couple.

"And you're a fine specimen of humanity yourself," Anthony said dryly.

Sören began to push the stroller. Huan was getting riled up now, growling at the two idiots, looking ready to spring. "Come on, let's not waste our breath on these assholes," Sören said.

The one with the buzz cut ran past Anthony to get in Sören's way. "What did you say about my arsehole, fuckin' f**?"

Huan growled and ran over to the buzz cut, barking furiously, and just as Huan jumped up to attack, he kicked the dog. "Fuckin' fleabag -" Huan whimpered and then got right back up.

"HEY! DON'T YOU HURT AN ANIMAL!" Sören yelled.

"Right, I'll save my energy for you filthy fuckin' -" The man took a swing at Sören.

Sören dodged, then clenched his fist and Anthony knew then that Sören wasn't going to hit back - he was going to choke the man without touching him. Anthony had done the same thing before, to other people, enemy combatants and terrorists. There was a time and a place, however, and Sören using his gifts out here in a public park and broad daylight would spell disaster. In the seconds between Sören's fist closing and when the man would begin to choke, Anthony spoke into Sören's mind.

Don't.

And with that, Anthony sprang into action, using his Krav Maga training. He was about to lunge at the man with the buzz cut who took a swing at Sören, and the man with the shaved head brought his right knee up to connect with Anthony's groin. Anthony reached out with his left hand and grabbed the leg, then immediately after the block he punched the Nazi in the face, hard enough to drop him. Once the man was on the ground, Anthony punched him in the face again, and then he kicked the Nazi in the gut and stomped on his balls, making him shriek. The man with the buzz lunged forward and Anthony charged, elbowing the man in the face, the throat, and the chest, then throwing several punches, before shoving him on top of his friend and kicking him, too, in the balls.

"Someone call the police!" a white woman screamed, clutching her pearls at the violence she'd witnessed.

"Aaaaand that would be our cue to leave," Anthony said, grabbing Huan's leash, quickly marching away, Sören pushing the stroller as fast as he could. Huan kept stalling to growl at the idiots on the ground, and Anthony spoke into the dog's mind, too. *Good boy. Come along.*

They quickly loaded the dog and the girls into the car, and then Anthony tore out of there onto the freeway. He knew he was speeding a little and he worried about that, too, but a few minutes later he saw they weren't being tailed.

Sören was shaking, breathing hard, unable to speak. At first Anthony thought Sören was just shaken up from being nearly assaulted by two homophobic Nazi shitstains, but then Anthony felt Sören broadcasting that it wasn't just that - it was Anthony making short work of them...

...and it was Anthony speaking into Sören's mind.

Since they'd met in December, Anthony had not yet disclosed that he was psychically gifted the same way Sören was. It was protocol that was not to be revealed unless absolutely necessary, as the people he was assigned to protect knowing about his status as a psychic could potentially cause problems for all involved if the same people who took Dag got their hands on Sören or one of his family - or if even worse people came after them - and that leaked out. There was also a certain amount of professionalism expected between the agent and their assignment - disclosing a shared paranormal status created a level of intimacy that was frowned upon by the department.

What had happened in the park was necessary. There were consequences, and Anthony was looking at them now, but he would do it again if he had to.

And now there was no going back, there was only going forward. Anthony spoke into Sören's mind again. *Sören.*

"You're Force sensitive?" Sören blinked.

Anthony's second of confusion was replaced by a low-level telepathic understanding, a back-of-the-mind broadcast this was the word that Sören and his family used to explain their gifts.

"Yes," Anthony said, and demonstrated by lifting his water bottle without touching it, floating it to his lips to take a drink, putting it back down in the cup holder.

"Why didn't you tell -"

"Protocol."

"Why are you telling me now?"

"If I had let you... use the Force... to choke that man in the park, in public, in broad daylight, it would be like Akureyri and your neighbors all over again, and my department really does not want to keep moving you around, and I don't want to be out of a job when I'm supposed to be keeping an eye on you and making sure you don't get in situations like that." Anthony watched Sören roll his eyes, and then he focused on the road again. "If we had been in a more secluded area, like an alley way, I would have let you choke him. I would have choked them myself." *I wouldn't have let them live. They were scum.*

"So instead you beat the fuck out of them and we almost had the cops called on us," Sören said.

"They attacked us first. I wouldn't want to deal with the police, but worst case scenario, MI6 would have some words with them on my behalf. Then they'd have some words for me for not staying out of trouble. But we didn't really have a choice, so I chose the option least likely to cause us long-term problems."

"Fair. I suppose I'm just..." Sören blinked again. "Surprised that you..."

"That what, Sören? I was in the Royal Navy. If we want to go there, I was in the Special Boat Service for a good portion of my career. Now I'm in MI6. You don't think I got there just playing nice with people all the time, do you? I have a body count. I'm a killer, Sören, never forget that. I won't ever harm someone unwarranted. But when it *is* warranted -"

"Well, I get it. Marcus is... well... he's like that too. I... I killed someone once. My uncle. He almost killed my sister." Sören cringed. "It was still a surprise since you're usually so..."

"Calm? Pleasant? I try to be a gentleman? There's a saying. 'Beware the nice ones.'"

There was a moment of silence as Sören reflected on this and finally he nodded. "I'm not saying what you did was wrong, or anything, just that... it surprised me. Not even so much that you're like that at all, I get it that you were in the service and you're in MI6 and so you've probably done some... things... it was more the..." Sören made a vague hand gesture and shook his head, chuckling. "You don't fuck around, do you?"

"No."

"What was that? Where the hell did you learn to fight like that? That was savage as fuck."

"I took Krav Maga while I was in the Special Boat Service," Anthony said.

"Oh! Nico... talked about me maybe taking that, a couple years ago." Sören gave a bitter snort. "When he thought I was in danger from Ingmar. He was right for the wrong

reasons. He thought Ingmar was in with the Russian mafia."

"Krav Maga is Israeli, not Russian." Anthony gave a small smile. "That made it particularly satisfying to beat up Nazis with it."

Huan barked as if to give his approval, and leaned forward from the back to put a paw on Anthony's shoulder.

"Oh for real?" Sören chuckled. "Wow. Did you... did you go to Israel to learn it?"

"No, but I have been to the Middle East. And haven't been back for... awhile."*And plan on keeping it that way if I can help it.* The best part about his job with MI6, besides seeing Sören, was knowing he wouldn't be going back to the desert and a useless, endless war anytime soon.

And seeing the djinn. Anthony had thought he was hallucinating with the high heat and stress during the second Gulf War, but with Sören saying there was at least one actual godlike being in the world...

...Anthony shivered.

Back at the house, Anthony stayed while Sören fed the girls and put them to bed. They sat out in the living room and Sören looked at the clock. "Ali and Kenny will be back soon," Sören said. "They went shopping to fix up their room..."

"I'll need to get going soon myself, because I've been gone from home since very early this morning and my cat is probably losing his mind."

Sören smiled. As if on cue, Snúdur hopped on his lap, purring loudly, and Pumpkin and Rasputin circled, rubbing against their legs. "I'd say you're welcome to stay for dinner if you want, but I know how cats are."

Anthony nodded. And then, all the talk about Krav Maga and (some of) Anthony's training gave Anthony a little nudge, and he cleared his throat. "So, Sören. Before I go, there's something I want you to think about."

"OK."

"You say you have concerns about Ingmar. That's a very big person to be on the wrong side of. And you mentioned enemies, plural."

"I told you I'm not really ready to talk about that yet. I'm sorry, but -"

Anthony put up his hand and nodded. He was frustrated that Sören wouldn't tell him, especially after disclosing this Ingmar Borovkov was some sort of god, but he knew Sören had his reasons and he had to respect that, he just hoped it wasn't going to cause problems, because he couldn't help what he didn't know. "And even without having enemies, we have your garden-variety, everyday sorts of shitstains like the two lovely individuals we encountered in the park today. And as we've established, you using your... Force abilities... out in public is a very, very bad way to go."

"So what are you suggesting?"

"I would like you to learn a martial art," Anthony said. "It's my job to look out for you, but I also don't want you to be completely helpless and dependent on me because I can't be

there 24/7, and something might happen to me -"

"Nothing better happen to you, Anthony." Sören sounded almost angry.

"I'll try." Anthony gave a small nod. He would have been amused by Sören's vehemence if he didn't sense so much heartbreak behind it, realizing Sören was attached to him too... and keeping a distance. "Even if nothing happens to me, I need you to be able to defend yourself if shit hits the fan, and when I say 'defend yourself' I mean without using the Force in public. So a martial art is prudent. I can teach you Krav Maga."

Sören took a deep breath. "I'll think about it."

"Please do. After what we experienced today I'm surprised you're not saying yes outright - "

"It's... difficult to explain why," Sören said. "Well, not difficult, but... fraught." Sören shrugged and hugged his knees. "My guardians were violent. I have a distaste for violence from watching them... from being on the receiving end of..." He didn't finish the sentence. "I was in an abusive relationship for a year. Justin hit me. He..." Sören didn't finish that sentence, either. He didn't need to; Anthony rather got the gist of it and once again he felt that surge of protective anger. "What I'm trying to say is, I *logically* understand the difference between what you did today and what they did, and I myself have... uh... had some moments." Sören looked at the board up where the glass door had been. "Repairman's coming tomorrow." Sören gave a nervous little laugh. Then he got serious. "I have a lot of rage, Anthony, and I'm afraid if I start learning how to be, ah, a killing machine..."

"You don't want to become a monster like the ones who hurt you."

Sören nodded.

"You won't," Anthony assured him. "I know it can be hard to think differently about it, but... please try to, because it could well be your life at stake here, or someone else's."

Sören looked down and nodded again.

"On that note, I'm going to go home." Anthony rubbed his face. "Take a shower, and a nap."

"OK." Sören got up and walked him to the door. "Thank you for... everything."

"You're welcome." Anthony put a hand on his shoulder - even that touch felt like too much, feeling the warmth of him, looking into those beautiful eyes that he wanted to get lost in.

"Do you want to come over on Friday, after I take Frankie to her prenatal exam?" Sören cocked his head to one side. "Have tea? I..." Sören bit his lower lip. "Maybe it's inappropriate of me to ask, but I could use a friend right now."

"You got it." Anthony nodded. He fought the urge to grab Sören and kiss him. "What time?"

"Six? Her appointment's at one and that gives me and her some time to hang out, and... you could have dinner with the fam again."

"All right." Anthony tried to not look or sound too eager, hating that he was this needy for being included. "I'll see you on Friday."

And then he walked away before they could hug... before Anthony would be even more tempted to touch, to kiss, to play.

If Sören was afraid of unleashing his rage, Anthony was afraid of unleashing his passion and complicating his life with attachment and love, even as he was starving for it. He knew he should tell MI6 he couldn't handle this assignment, but he was drawn to Sören inexorably... fire calling to fire.

Chapter 13

Though Ali had offered to take Sören and Frankie to the prenatal exam, Maglor had insisted on taking the afternoon off from Face the Music to be there as a show of solidarity for them after everything that happened. Yet, on the drive there Maglor was unusually quiet even for him, and Sören knew it wasn't just because Maglor was listening to Depeche Mode playing on the car stereo.

"You OK?" Sören asked finally.

"Yeah, I'm fine," Maglor said.

Sören raised an eyebrow at him in the rearview mirror, and spoke into his mind:*We both know you're not fine, Kanafinwë.*

Maglor didn't answer that right away.

He gave them door service in the parking lot - it was May seventh, and Frankie was due in late July, and was at that stage in her pregnancy where she was waddling and moving more awkwardly. Sören lingered for a moment before he got out of the Bentley. "Are you coming in with us?"

"I'm going to run some errands," Maglor said. "I feel like this is really personal and intimate for the two of you and I would be intruding."

Sören knew that Maglor wasn't lying, but he also knew it was more than that. Maglor's shielding had been stronger than usual the last few days, Sören knew because Maglor more than anyone else in the house had messy feelings about what happened and Maglor was trying to not overwhelm everyone with the sheer force of his rage. Sören had respected the mental distance but now he poked at it and he could feel that though Maglor was happy for Sören and Frankie, and excited about the impending new baby, it was also a painful reminder. The parting shot from *that man*, Sören couldn't even bring himself to think of the name now - *You will never see him again... You are not worthy of your son.* kept ringing through Maglor's head, shattering Maglor over and over again each time.

Sören wanted to scream. He fought the urge to climb over the front seat, take Maglor into his arms, hold him tight and never let go.

It also made Sören ache for another reason - he knew how difficult it was for Maglor to be reminded of having a child, and the fact that he was willing to give them transportation to and from the appointment despite that, to be there for what family he had left, was a big deal. It made Sören love Maglor even more.

Knowing he felt it, Maglor reached out and took Sören's hand for a moment, squeezed, and kissed Sören's hand before pulling back.

"Call me when you guys are ready to be picked up," Maglor said.

Sören desperately grasped for levity so he didn't break down right then. "I'm always ready to be picked up, *elskan.*"

Maglor tweaked his nose and gave him a mock stern look over his shoulder. "Go take care of Auntie Lalwen, you brat."

There was either a short flight of steps or a ramp to get up to the clinic, and Frankie chose

the steps. Sören put an arm around her to support her on the way up, and once they were inside he kept his arm around her, giving her a little squeeze as they approached the reception desk.

"O'Malley, one o'clock," Frankie said. Her given surname was O'Riordan but since the move to Australia she'd been using an alias like the others, and she was pretending to be from Ireland - like her mother and aunt - instead of London's East End where she was born and raised. She kept an Irish accent now all the time, so she didn't slip.

"I'll tell the doctor you're here," the receptionist said.

Sören and Frankie took a seat, sitting next to each other. Sören tenderly began to rub her belly, and Frankie gave him a little smile and kissed the tip of his nose before she leaned on him. Across their bond Sören could feel how much distress she was in, with one of her partners abandoning her days before, though she was outwardly trying to keep it together. Sören felt angry all over again - he was even angrier for Frankie and Margrét than he was for himself. It was one thing for him and *that man* to have been friends with benefits, it was another thing for Frankie and Margrét to build a life with Flóki and have it all come apart so suddenly.

Flóki should be here for this, and of course he's not, Sören thought to himself bitterly, and then the words *Oath breaker* followed after that sentence, remembering the oath of fealty Flóki had sworn to him. *Honorless bastard.*

Sören could feel the temperature in the room rising, even as the doctor's office was air conditioned, and he took deep breaths, knowing he needed to pull himself together. The last thing he needed - that Frankie needed - was to accidentally use the Force in public under heightened emotions.

Sören made himself look at the TV screen on the wall opposite them. Usually when they came here the news was on, and to keep his stress levels down Sören carefully curated his news intake, taking a brief look online or getting information secondhand from Dooku who avidly followed the world news and had opinions on it. But Sören needed to think about something other than Flóki, and *that man*.

And that was when he saw it - there was a news report that Katla, the Icelandic volcano, had begun erupting on May fourth. Eyjafjallajökull had erupted in October - coinciding with the Dagor Dagorath in another universe - and eruptions of Eyjafjallajökull had generally been followed by eruptions of Katla, so vulcanologists had been predicting Katla's eruption since last October. Here it was now. Sören watched the news footage of the eruption with horror, mouth opening, tears in his eyes, and he felt as if he couldn't breathe when he saw the destruction in the wake of the volcano - the glacier flooding on the bridges and roads, the carnage of dead livestock, the plumes of ash.

A chill went through him, hair standing on end, skin in gooseflesh. Sören did the mental math of the time Katla started erupting, and it correlated to when he had Force thrown a god through the glass patio door.

I did that. The pit of Sören's stomach rose and the choking feeling intensified.*Oh god. Oh god, I did that...*

Frankie gripped his wrist tight enough to hurt, and her voice cut into his mind, sharp, almost angry. *No, you daft cunt.*

Sören gave her a look. He played her the mental movie of those fraught moments in the living room, the way he'd glowed white and spoken with a voice not his own, spoken

Quenya, feeling like he was on fire. He played her the mental movie of when he had been driving in his jeep on the Ring Road when the Dagorath hit, the vision of Fingolfin and Finarfin vaporized by dark lightning, and something in that world's Fëanor had *snapped*, nothing left to lose. Sören felt like he'd been under intense pressure and friction for months, between the fallout of the other universe's Dagorath, the disappearance of Dag and the trail growing colder all the time, the emergency relocation from Iceland to Australia. What had happened with *that man* felt very much like the last straw, both him taking Maglor's son away from him and being complicit with Flóki abandoning his partners just so, without even getting into his role in Arafinwë's death and not telling Sören. That pressure and friction had finally exploded in a show of rage like Sören had never displayed before, and apparently it hadn't just stopped there.

That is not a coincidence. Sören felt the hysteria rising in him and desperately tried to contain it since they were in a public place, a waiting room of all places, where people were already nervous about medical appointments. *You will not* tell me *that isn't connected to* that -

All right, I bloody won't. But you didn't do it on purpose. Frankie took his hand and shook her head.

That was part of what scared him. That catastrophic anger had not cooled down since May fourth, it had only grown stronger as he'd had time to think about all of it, and stew and stew in his rage and the injustice of it all, the hypocrisy from one who claimed to dislike unfairness so much, the hypocrisy of one who had set himself up as a god and was now - in Sören's opinion - on his way to becoming the same sort of petty tyrant the Valar were, but in a different way. *Meet the new boss, same as the old boss.* It seemed to Sören that it was imperative now to start getting his shit together and prepare to take down the Aesir, then the Valar, if only so reclaiming the power they had bound would provide a check and balance to that and *other tinpot dictator gods*, Sören thought with a scowl. But Sören felt like a wreck internally, he was downright traumatized from what had happened earlier that week. It was clear he already had some sort of power above and beyond normal Force use, but it was also clear he didn't know how to control it, and he didn't want more blood on his hands until he knew what he was doing.

Or at least, not the blood of innocents. Sören's teeth grit as he thought about the neo-Nazis in the park, and how they had attacked first, not caring that there were babies present. That was the worst sort of filth as far as Sören was concerned, and it made him furious that people like that still existed, and could be so hateful for no reason.

And yet, he could not bring himself to hate Mortals, *the way certain other people do*, Sören snarled on the inside. Gods who hated humans and thought them lesser lifeforms, begot humans who hated other humans for petty reasons. It seemed to Sören that the entire concept of religion - any religion, all religion - was designed to enslave humans to one god or another, and in turn enslave each other based on some sort of hierarchy. Humanity would never be free until they got rid of gods, and it seemed that the gods were such predators that it would take a god - or gods - to get rid of or at least get in the way of the other gods, the ones who demanded "worship" and "service", which was too many of them.

And of course, there had always been those cursed with a sense of glorious purpose, one Chosen One or another making the archetypal Hero's Journey, new gods supplanting the old ones, as time wore on - Sören remembered his father Sigurð's diary, reading that Odin had once been a human shaman, Wodanaz, and had ascended to fight giants preying on his people, and then had become a predator himself. It seemed that a certain somebody was about to become the newest casualty of being drunk on their own power, with their callous disregard for those they hurt in the name of "beauty". Sören was reminded of

studying Greek mythology in his younger years, the stories of Aphrodite punishing humans for petty offenses, including aesthetic. And it seemed to Sören that the Timeless Halls was too much like another Olympus, another Asgard. *No wonder at least some of us chose to reincarnate as human, here. It wasn't just to be where Maglor was, on some level we knew we needed to experience what it was like to be human to keep from becoming...* Sören shuddered, seeing apocalypses in his mind's eye across different universes, nuclear war, pandemics that gods caused, playing with humans for fun...

What the fuck.

Sören rubbed his face and took some more deep breaths.

The wheel spins on and on. I will ascend, and break the wheel. And I will not do it by going back to my old self. I will do it my way. And Force help me, I will not turn into that *on my way.*

Sören had that sick feeling in his stomach again. *Goddamn, that's crazy talk.* It felt especially crazy to be having this sort of cosmic revelation in a doctor's waiting room. But what he'd seen just that week was beyond crazy.

Sören closed his eyes. "Fuck," he said under his breath.

Then there was a voice at the door. "Ms. O'Malley?"

Sören followed Frankie to a back exam room. He observed as Frankie went through the standard motions of a physical and answered questions, and finally she lay there on a table waiting for the tech to come and do the ultrasound. Sören pulled up his chair and stroked Frankie's hand, trying to focus on her rather than the news footage of Katla, and the implications of it having blown at the exact time of his outburst.

At last the tech came in, a bright, cheerful young woman with long blonde hair in a ponytail, wearing dinosaur print scrubs and nerdy glasses. Sören continued to hold Frankie's hand as the tech did the ultrasound, and they watched the screen together. Sören had been to other prenatal exams and looked at the live ultrasound feed, and it was fascinating each time. While he was staunchly pro-choice, he nonetheless felt an attachment to seeing the image on the screen. *That's our child. My child.* Now Sören's eyes welled up, with how much farther along the pregnancy was, seeing the fetus more developed... and how very precious family was at this moment, with all they'd lost. Frankie was crying a little too.

The tech began making small talk. "You guys excited, yeh?"

Sören nodded vehemently and Frankie giggled and nodded too.

"You getting everything ready?"

"Not yet," Frankie said. "We still have things to discuss and... it's been a rough few months. But things will be ready before Baby gets here, have no fear."

The tech gave a little smile. "You're far enough along into the pregnancy where we can take a looksie... would you like to know what gender the baby is?"

Sören bristled. "Sex," he said.

The tech's eyebrows shot up.

"Sex," Sören repeated. "Sex and gender are two different things. Sex is what you have

down there, gender is here." Sören tapped his forehead.

The tech tried not to react but Sören could tell in the Force that he had made her uncomfortable, she felt a little embarrassed by her wording. *Good,* Sören thought to himself, thinking of the hell Margrét had gone through with her transition, all the bullshit she'd put up with over the years because of people's prejudices. And he knew that the tech meant well and hadn't meant to offend, but Sören found himself getting angry again, not so much at the tech specifically, but at how much Margrét had been *hurt*, even by supposedly well-meaning people who said unthinking things about what women were and weren't. Margrét had a very unfortunate dating history - a lot of people thought the "original plumbing" was a dealbreaker before Frankie. And though it didn't seem like it had been a problem for Flóki, Sören *knew* his sister was wondering if, in the end, he had decided she wasn't "beautiful enough", and he found himself wanting to scream, and he wasn't even trans himself.

Sören wasn't naive enough to think that humanity would get rid of all of its ignorance once the gods were taken out of the picture, but he was sure that releasing the chokehold would help.

Frankie broke the awkward silence. "If it's all the same to you, I'd like to keep it a surprise," Frankie said.

"Yeah, me too," Sören said. He admitted he was curious, but he was fine either way, since as far as he was concerned the genital configuration didn't really matter, the kid would tell them what gender they were when they were old enough to have a sense of gender identity, and they would go from there. He was more concerned that the baby would be healthy.

Frankie had tried to keep calm during the ultrasound but once Maglor came to get them and they were a safe enough distance away from the clinic, Frankie let off her own steam. "In 2021, how are people still feckin' asking 'do you want to see the *gender* of the baby.' People need to wake up already. I mean, sure it was an innocent slip, but I just wish..." Frankie sighed and made grumbly noises.

"Even without the whole issue that our kid might be trans, or might not," Sören said, "wanting to know what *sex* the baby is, like... the only thing that's really good for is planning baby names, and the way the tech was talking it sounded like she thought us knowing would mean we'd know what color to paint a nursery or what color baby clothes to get and..." Sören made a face. "I'm not doing all that pink and blue bullshit for *my* kid."

"Same," Frankie said. "And they can play with all kinds of different toys, none of this 'dolls are for girls and footballs and science kits are for boys' shite."

"Which, you know," Sören said, folding his arms, "is yet another reason why you couldn't pay me to go back to Valinor. Women were expected to be *soft* and..."

"I know." Frankie sneered. "I fecking know, mate, I was there. Feckin' Laws of the bloody Valar, feckin' cunts. Cuntinor is more like it."

Maglor shook with silent laughter that became less silent at the traffic light. "Tell us how you really feel, Frankie."

"Feckin' gobshite bloody wankers."

—

Frankie and Sören had talked about spending some quality time together after the appointment, and Frankie wanted to take a nap when they got back to Sören's place. She'd been wanting naps more frequently, and Sören himself thought a nap sounded good, since he hadn't slept well the last few days.

Ali was watching the babies while they were out, and the first thing Sören did when he got back was hug Kate and Tori, feed them, and put them to sleep while Frankie watched. Then Sören spent a few minutes just looking at Kate and Tori while they slept, feeling love for them so fierce it hurt. Even though they weren't biologically his, they were his for all intents and purposes now, and they had been his in another life.

Frankie put a hand on his arm. "You're a good dad," she said softly.

"I hope so." Sören sighed. "I really want to do right by my kids, give them a good life."

That word *life* echoed through his head as he and Frankie curled up together, and he once again thought of how the blood that offered immortality to the rest of the family was gone now. It was just Maglor, Sören, and Dooku who were immortal. The thought of watching his children grow up and age and die, while he lived on, filled him with an indescribable pain, and he knew that was still not as cruel as the punishment dealt Maglor - never seeing his son again. Sören tried not to break down and cry, not wanting to disturb Frankie as she slept, but a few silent tears spilled. He now had a better understanding of what Maglor had gone through all these decades, centuries, millennia, getting attached to people, loving and losing, his heart broken over and over again until he couldn't take it anymore and kept a distance from others, until Sören came along. It was a terrible pain and it had only just begun.

Sören's arms tightened around Frankie and his exhaustion overtook him, crying himself to sleep.

He'd set the alarm for five, to give himself an hour before Anthony's scheduled visit at six. He didn't think he'd sleep that long, but he did sleep for most of that time, waking up fifteen minutes before the alarm went off with a gasp, heart racing in terror.

He'd had a nightmare. Since the age of four, Sören had been plagued by recurring nightmares of burning to death, going up in smoke and ash. He knew now he was remembering how he died when he was Fëanor. But this time it wasn't him going up in flames - it was Frankie.

It's just a dream, Sören tried to tell himself as he lay there, watching Frankie sleep.*You're worried about her. Miriel died in childbirth, and you've been afraid of retaliation from the gods, one of whom can make fire. It's just your brain being a dick.*

Nonetheless, he was not only afraid, but he had that leaden weight of despair on him, the feeling of *why bother getting out of bed* He remembered the depression he'd fallen into after feeling the Dagorath in another universe, and he was determined to not get back to that state, now that he had children to think of. But everything felt useless, hopeless. *You have these grand delusions of overthrowing the gods, you can't even protect your own family.*

Sören looked at the clock again. He was going to have to get out of bed for Anthony's visit. He thought of Anthony, those green eyes, that boyish smile... how hot he looked beating up those neo-Nazis in the park. *A Mortal. Someone who is going to die someday. You cannot get attached to him.* But Sören knew he was already attached, though he

would try to keep it at a safe distance. The thought of seeing Anthony again made him smile, looking forward to spending at least a little time in his presence, a balm for the pain.

Frankie's eyes opened, and then she yawned and stretched. Sören kissed the tip of her nose, and reached out to shut off the alarm. He rained kisses over her face, making her giggle, and she kissed him back. They rubbed noses, and then Frankie rested her head on his shoulder.

"I love you, you know," Sören told her.

"I know. I love you too." Frankie patted him.

"I'm glad I went with you to the exam today."

Frankie picked her head up and looked into Sören's eyes and then she said, "Flo -" She couldn't even say his name, let alone finish whatever sentence she was going to say.

And in that one syllable was a world of pain. Sören felt it, could feel her broken heart shattering all over again. Sören pulled her close and started rocking her, and she sobbed into his chest. Sören gave into his tears, no longer silent, sobbing along with her.

"He's gone," Frankie wept. "He's gone and I don't even know what I did wrong. He didn't even say a proper goodbye, he just said 'I'm leaving'..."

"I'm so sorry." Sören stroked her hair, rocking her harder. "I am so, so, so sorry."

"Not as sorry as he's gonna be if I ever see his sorry arse again."

Sören chuckled despite himself - one of the things he loved about Frankie was her feistiness, remembering the last time Justin Roberts had attacked him and she'd hit him with a steel folding chair, then physically dragged him down a flight of stairs and continued to kick his ass outside. She was fearless, as Lalwen had been back in the day, defying the Valar's proscription for women to be gentle and meek, fighting as well as her brothers. She had, along with Fingolfin, taught Maglor himself to fight.

Then Sören got serious. "He's a god, Frankie. We're not gods."

"Yet."

Or ever. Sören's mind replayed the nightmare of Frankie going up in flames, losing her before he had the power to do anything about it.

But then Frankie's anger gave way to more sadness. "I loved him. I loved him and I don't know how he could just treat me like that, treat your sister like that. We used to be so happy..."

"I think the Dagorath did something to them," Sören said, remembering the intense grief he'd sensed in *that man*, verging on madness. "Grief can fuck a person up. I'm not excusing it, though."

"You better not be. There's no excuse for what they did." Frankie sobbed harder. "It hurts. It fucking hurts, Sören..."

"I know. I know, *elskan.*" Sören rubbed her back.

"He didn't even give an explanation why, which is the worst part. So now I'm stuck here wondering what it is I did." Frankie picked her head up and the look of sadness on her face tore at Sören's heart, wanting to do almost anything to make her hurt stop. "Like I

wonder if it's because I look like a beach ball now..."

"Oh my god *no*, Frankie." Sören felt that flare of anger again, hot and stinging. She had always been on the chubby side before she'd gotten pregnant, but Sören liked her curves - as an artist, he appreciated diversity, finding beauty in all skin tones, shapes and sizes. That was another reason why he didn't want to go back to Valinor, the Elves all looked very alike. But he knew Frankie had gotten a lot of shit over the years for her weight, including and especially from her mother, and from an ex-girlfriend of hers years ago. And now at this stage in her pregnancy, it was true that Frankie was quite rotund, but he wasn't less attracted to her. And yet, remembering the way Ingwion had condescended them about their Mortal forms compared to their Elven forms, and Flóki had just sat there as if he were complicit with everything being said, Sören couldn't help but wonder it if *was* that, even though Flóki had seemed to be loving and accepting once upon a time. Maybe the grief of the Dagorath *had* changed his opinion, made him feel like their human forms weren't pretty enough anymore, wanting the Elves back as they were. It still made Sören furious - even if that wasn't why, the fact that Frankie was even thinking that it had something to do with her weight made his fists clench, made him feel like he was in the grips of a fever.

"Sören..." Frankie's eyes widened with alarm. "Sören, are you OK? You're suddenly really hot -"

Across the room, atop the dresser, the frosted glass of the lamp shattered. Frankie let out a little scream and Sören's hand flew to cover his mouth. Frankie gave Sören a stricken look, and looked back at the ruined lamp and the mess of glass with horror, and back at Sören. She pulled away slowly, and Sören held out his hands.

"Frankie, I would never hurt you."

"I... I know." Frankie swallowed hard. "I..." She looked at the lamp again.

From the nursery, Kate and Tori began to squall. Sören facepalmed. This was not what he needed to deal with right now.

The first order of business was safety, so the dog and the cats didn't get glass in their paws. Sören got a broom, a brush and a dustpan from the hall closet, and then he set to work cleaning the broken glass, both sweeping it up manually and using the Force to move the brush around to make the job go faster. As soon as the glass was cleaned up, Sören went to his daughters - Frankie was already in there trying to calm them down.

Sören and Frankie sat with them, taking turns holding them, rocking them. Ali poked her head in the nursery. "Everything all right?"

"Yeah." Sören exhaled sharply. "Just... a disturbance in the Force, is all."

Ali folded her arms and gave Sören a look, and Sören spoke into her mind, *I'll tell you later.*

When the girls were calm, Sören put them in their twin bassinet and brought them out to the living room. He got lemonade for himself and Frankie, and she came over to get it rather than letting him wait on her, which made him shake his head, but he also understood still wanting to do things for yourself. Frankie took the lemonade glasses out of his hands and put them down on the counter and then she threw her arms around him.

"I'm sorry," Sören said again. "I didn't mean to scare you -"

"Shhhh." Frankie squeezed him. "It's more that I'm scared *for* you, Sören. It's obvious how

much all of this shit is bothering you."

"Well, it's bothering all of us, and I don't want you to feel like you can't vent on me without it upsetting me and it..." Sören made a vague hand gesture and just showed her the mental image of the lamp glass shattering again.

"I said shhhhh, you cunt."

Sören chuckled and he returned the squeeze. They rocked together for a moment and Sören leaned down and rubbed his nose in her short red pixie cut, kissed the top of her head...

...and then the baby kicked.

Sören gasped. Frankie's face lit up, and Sören felt himself smiling so hard it hurt his face, and now he was crying for a completely different reason. "Oh my god," Sören said. "They kicked me!"

"Yeah, they're telling you to not be a daft cunt," Frankie teased.

Sören tweaked her nose, and Frankie got up on her tiptoes and tweaked his right back.

The euphoria of feeling his baby kick for the first time put Sören in better spirits in time for Anthony's arrival at six. But Anthony could clearly sense something had happened, as he entered the house cautiously, looking around as if he were expecting to see the ruins of a war zone.

Sören offered him refreshment, and then he decided it would be better if they sat outside. He invited Frankie to join them, but Frankie said, "No it's OK, I'll sit in here with the girls if you want a few minutes alone." She gave Sören a pointed look, and Sören felt his face flush, wondering if she knew he was attracted to Anthony.

Sören and Anthony sat in the garden, and Sören threw a ball for Huan to chase. For a few minutes they just sat in silence and Sören finally noticed Anthony giving him a look - the same look Ali had given him in the door of the nursery.

"What's going on?" Anthony asked.

"Not much."

Anthony raised an eyebrow and said nothing, just sipped his lemonade. "How was the prenatal exam?"

"Looks good so far." Sören smiled, trying to defuse the tension. "The baby kicked me today."

"Awwww." Anthony smiled back, then he got stern again. "Seriously, Sören, I know something's wrong. Like I keep telling you, I can't help you if I don't know -"

"I really doubt you can help me with this."

"Try me."

Sören's mind went right into the gutter at that. *I'd like to try you, all right.* He didn't say it aloud, and he hoped Anthony didn't hear it - he was trying to be a lot more careful about his shielding and his thoughts around Anthony now that he knew Anthony was Force-sensitive too - and of course, there was the delicious fantasy of sucking Anthony's cock, feeling it inside him...

Sören cleared his throat. As loath as he was to talk about the craziest of his weird shit, he had to say something, if only to get his mind off the subject of... getting Anthony off.

"I'm still really upset about what happened a few days ago," Sören said.

"What, the neo-Nazis?" Anthony pursed his lips. "Or me not telling you about my -"

"Well, I suppose I'm still upset about those scumbags too," Sören said, "and I know you had reasons for not telling me about your Force sensitivity before now. But I meant when... he... left."

Anthony seemed to know immediately who Sören meant, and just nodded. "Being left by someone you cared about can be difficult, I imagine."

Sören wondered about the *I imagine*, which sounded like Anthony had never experienced a broken heart himself. He wondered about that - what Anthony's romantic and sexual history had been like - and then he made himself stop wondering. Sören went on. "Well, this goes above and beyond the usual being left by a partner. It was the way he left, and everything he said... everything he did." Sören's fists clenched, thinking again of the wrong done Maglor. Sören took a few deep breaths. "And when I say really upset, I mean..."

Anthony cocked his head to one side. "Don't tell me you got in a fight or something."

"Not quite." Sören sipped his lemonade and sat back. "I got so angry a little while ago that a glass lamp broke completely by accident. Just shattered without me touching it."

"Jesus."

"That on its own would be scary, but..." Sören swallowed hard and closed his eyes, fearing what the reaction would be to what came next. He opened his eyes and met Anthony's. "I'm assuming you've seen the news. Katla started erupting when I, ah." He looked at the glass patio door, newly repaired, then back at Anthony.

"Jesus *Christ.*" Anthony let out a low whistle.

"I mean, experts have been saying for months it was gonna blow. Eyjafjallajökull blew last October when I was driving, and..." Sören decided not to tell him about the Dagorath, at least not yet. Telling Anthony *another universe's version of me might have destroyed an entire fucking universe* seemed considerably more crazy than implying he'd accidentally set a volcano off with his anger.

"Sören." Anthony gave him a stern look. "You do realize that this is the point where MI6 would want you brought in to keep a closer eye. Much closer. Putting it bluntly, they'd want to weaponize you."

Oh god. Sören shuddered. "You're... you..."

"I'm not going to say anything," Anthony said softly. "I don't want you put in a cage. But you need to get a hold of yourself."

Sören sensed in the Force that Anthony believed him, and to Sören that was actually worse than if Anthony had just laughed at him and said *yeah right, Katla erupting was just a coincidence, you're full of shit, full of yourself*.

"I don't know how," Sören whispered. He felt like such an idiot. He had thought months ago, after Dag disappeared, that he'd hit his lowest moment in life, feeling absolutely

helpless, tossed about by fate. This made that moment feel like a walk in the park by comparison.

"My offer still stands to teach you Krav Maga," Anthony said. "Learning a martial art isn't just necessary to protect your children, protect your family, but you need a safe outlet, a way to channel all that anger. I would suggest contact sports if you were more of a sports guy, but this will serve just as well."

"And you're not terrified I'll accidentally hurt you?"

"Sören, I'm going to teach you how to hurt me on purpose." Anthony gave a smug little smile. "And I'm going to hurt you right back. You saw what I did to the Nazis in the park. I was being fairly restrained. Krav Maga is nasty."

"But I mean..." Sören made a vague hand gesture. "I worry that once I unleash the beast, so to speak, it'll be more dangerous, not less."

"I disagree. I think the more you keep everything bottled up, the more dangerous it will be. All that pressure needs a release. Let me help you." Anthony narrowed his eyes. "If I don't, it's only a matter of time before MI6 will. You had better hope they don't make the connection between you and Katla. Like I said, I won't say anything, but..."

Sören considered. He wanted to believe what Anthony was saying, that a martial art would be a good outlet for him... and that it would build confidence, something that had never been his strong suit in this life, coming from an abusive background, something that had been rattled the last several months as his life had gotten so badly shaken up. He and his family had powerful enemies, and the only way to truly keep them safe was to neutralize the threat. This was the first step in that direction.

"If nothing else, do it for your children," Anthony said. "You don't want to scare them if you get angry at something and you accidentally shatter glass around them, or worse."

Sören sighed. He had already been most of the way there, but now that confirmed it. He owed it to his kids to not grow up in the kind of fear he'd grown up in - not that he would ever be violent to them the way his aunt and uncle had been to him and his siblings and cousin, but to a small child, seeing glass break when Pabbi was angry would still be traumatic and teach the child to walk on eggshells and he didn't want that life for his children.

"OK," Sören said, nodding. "You have a deal. When do we start?"

"Monday," Anthony said. "Is there someplace in the house we can practice? Otherwise I can take you somewhere."

There was a mostly-empty room that Dooku was using as a meditation room. "Yeah, we've got a place."

Anthony reached out to take Sören's hand to shake on the offer, and then their hands lingered for a moment, fingertips brushing as they pulled apart. "I won't give you false promises that everything will be all right," Anthony told him. "I can only tell you I'll do everything I can to help you."

"*Takk.*" Sören's entire hand was tingling, and his breath caught at Anthony's eyes, so green. *I think I'm beyond help, where you're concerned.*

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Later that evening after dinner, Anthony went home, and when Margrét came to pick Frankie up, Frankie and Sören lingered in the carport. Sören hadn't talked about the impending Krav Maga lessons after the meeting with Anthony outside, or really anything about the conversation. But now Frankie was fishing.

"So, how did it go with your posh friend there?"

Sören snorted. Frankie was never going to let Anthony's background go. "It went."

Frankie rolled her eyes.

"OK, OK." Sören nodded. "He's been getting on me to learn a martial art so I can, you know, defend myself... or the kids... or other people in the family, like you, if needed. And today he said it might be, ah... a good outlet for my anger issues."

"I agree," Frankie said. "It would also be hot."

Sören's laughter rang out. "Well, *elskan*, if you'd told me that I might have signed up for something before now..."

Frankie playfully swatted him, and then she got serious. "But yeah. I think you should. Especially with the anger thing. I don't want to see you accidentally do something in public and you go missing like Dag did."

Oh fuck. Sören hadn't even been thinking about that but then he remembered again Anthony's words: *They'd want to weaponize you.* Sören didn't want to become the next Winter Soldier, but using his mind instead of a gun. "I start Krav Maga on Monday."

"Krav Maga, eh? That's some hardcore shit."

"Anthony is hardcore," Sören said.

"Like porn?"

Sören's face was on fire now, and Frankie watched his reaction, cackling. Sören tried to protest but he knew any statement of *I don't like him like that* would be lies, and he was so flustered thinking about Anthony having sex that he couldn't even make words.

"Don't think I don't see you two making eyes at each other," Frankie said.

You two? Sören bit his lip. Anthony kept himself very tightly shielded, but Sören had felt a spark between them, and...

"You should ask him out proper," Frankie said.

"Oh god, Frankie, no."

"Why not?"

He's Mortal. Just like you are, and losing you is going to be hard enough. "I... I can't." Sören shrugged. "I..."

"You're an idiot." Frankie scowled. "Don't even tell me this is going to be like a repeat of the situation with me where you didn't say anything to me for years -"

"Well, no. I mean... I could say something to you. I can't with him -"

Frankie facepalmed. "Good god, Sören, you're impossible."

"I have my reasons."

Frankie gave him a look. "You haven't heard the last of this."

"I'm sure." Sören kissed the tip of her nose and patted her. "Go home."

Frankie slapped his ass, and then she waved as she walked over to Margrét's car. Margrét waved and honked before she drove off, and Sören waved back, watching her drive away. He hadn't really spoken to his sister yet since what happened - he'd been keeping his distance because he knew he would get even angrier when he felt his sister's raw pain, and his anger had been difficult enough.

At least he might find a way of dealing with it, soon. Or the Krav Maga training might create other problems. Unleashing not the beast of his anger, but his desire - Sören thought of Anthony beating up the neo-Nazis, and a frisson went through him at the thought of sparring with Anthony, getting to see more of that power and strength, getting to *feel*.

What have I gotten myself into.

Chapter 14

It was Saturday night, and Ali couldn't sleep.

Since everything had happened on Tuesday, she hadn't slept much, or well. What had gone down on Tuesday had dredged up a bunch of ugly feelings for her about the prejudice she'd experienced as an Aboriginal, from the outright racism with slurs, shunning, rudeness and threats, to the more thinly veiled bigotry of supposed well-meaning liberals who would never think of themselves as racist. Being in an interracial relationship with a Korean-American had met with everything from strange looks to obnoxious comments, and already by the age of six her mixed-race children had been bullied by some of their peers. And yet, as much as humanity sometimes sickened her, she knew the Elves were no better - indeed, xenophobia was something Elves and humans had in common. Going to Valinor would be trading one set of problems for another, and the idea that she should give up her identity now to take back a form with pale white skin made her seethe with rage every time she thought about it.

She was glad that Maglor, at least, was not like that. It was always her way to be angrier at wrongs against the people she loved, than wrongs against herself, and now she felt the rage in her burn even hotter as she thought of how Maglor was hurt in all of this, having his own son taken away for the mere crime of choosing a life lived among "paltry Mortals". She'd felt the empathic blowback of grief from him, though he was trying very hard to hide it... he was, indeed, trying even harder not to follow the god and attempt to kill him. Just the little touch of sorrow that she'd sensed in Maglor had been enough to make her break down and cry for him in private, when no one was looking. She couldn't imagine what it was like to lose a child like that - to be told the son you thought was dead was alive, holding out that hope of reunion for just a split second, only to shatter it with scoffing that their paths would never cross again. The thought of never seeing Metallica or Megadeth again made her hysterical, never mind loving someone a long period of time.

Nobody in the family was OK right now, but she knew Maglor was the least OK out of everyone, and it was that which kept her up tonight, laying awake, wishing there was something she could say or do. She knew that in her life as Maedhros, they had been exceptionally close, practically joined at the hip, and even without the weight of that bond from the past, she'd become very fond of Maglor these last few months. Her caring for him was not just based in the life they had shared as brothers, but now becoming family all over again in the present.

She hated feeling helpless like this. Even more than the anger she felt at the god behaving so rudely on Tuesday, the feeling like more than the patio door had been broken and there was nothing she could do to *fix* it, was intense and nigh unbearable. It was adding insult to injury. She herself felt that urge to chase the god down and attack him, but Force sensitive or not, she was still Mortal and limited in what she could do to him. And it wouldn't bring back Maglor's son. It wouldn't undo the damage that had already been done. The wound that would not heal. She knew what that kind of pain was like; she closed her eyes and remembered the intense searing pain of the Silmaril, the agony that caused her, as Maedhros, to eventually end his own life.

It felt like Maglor was bearing a similar sort of pain on the inside, and she was worried for him.

"Fuck," Ali muttered under her breath.

She sat up and looked at Kenny, sleeping soundly, hogging the covers as usual. She envied him his peace, though she knew of course that he wasn't really OK either. She looked at the clock on the bedside table then - it was after two in the morning. She rose, yawning and stretching, and quietly tiptoed out of the bedroom. She needed to go for a walk or a run, do something physical both to distract herself from the unproductive yet painful feelings, and try to exhaust herself so maybe she could crash and get at least a few hours sleep.

Huan greeted her in the hallway. She stooped to pet him, and he put his paws on her shoulders, licking her face. Ali smiled and ruffled his fur, kissed his snout. "Hey," she whispered. "Wanna go for a walk? Wanna go out?"

Huan nodded and gave a yip.

"Shhhh," Ali said, holding a finger to her lips.

Huan's leash hung on a hook by the glass patio door, and as Ali stepped into the living room, Huan trotting beside her, Ali saw Maglor on the couch, reading, brow furrowed. Most of the lights in the living room and kitchen were off, save a small one, and Maglor's natural glow was much more obvious in the darkness, like a living lamp.

Ali had seen him unglamoured the last several days, now that he'd revealed himself and no longer felt the need to glamour himself around Ali and Kenny - though Maglor still glamoured himself when he left the house, and he would be glamouring himself for Anthony's visit tomorrow. But Ali still wasn't "used to" it, and she didn't know if she ever would be. That didn't mean she wanted Maglor to start glamouring himself around the house again to make her comfortable - she wanted him to be himself in his own home and not have to hide. Still, the beauty of him unglamoured was unsettling, like looking upon an angel or a god. Even though she once had worn a similar form, it was still alien enough to her that seeing him filled her with awe in the truest sense of a mingled wonder and terror. Dooku and Kenny had a conversation about it in the kitchen yesterday and Dooku had compared it to seeing the Milky Way for the first time in rural Iceland, after living in London with its light pollution, and that sharp awareness of the vastness of space and how Earth was just a tiny speck amidst *so much*. Ali knew that Maglor would never hurt her - Maglor would die for her or anyone in the family - and even so, she felt profoundly small and vulnerable in the presence of his power.

Then Maglor looked up from his book and smiled at her, and it took her breath away. Ali's heart skipped a beat and her stomach fluttered, and she felt her face break into a big cheesy grin in response. "Er, hi," Ali said softly. "I hope I'm not interrupting you."

"You're fine," Maglor said, putting his book down. He had dropped the fake German accent at home, but he still had an accent that sounded vaguely like he was a native Romance language speaker but Ali knew, of course, that was not it. One of Maglor's thick dark brows went up, his silver gaze penetrating. "Can't sleep?"

"Yeh." Ali nodded. She gestured to Huan. "I was gonna take him for a walk."

"I'll join you, if you don't mind company."

"Not at all. Please." Those words came out a little too eagerly, and Ali felt like kicking herself.

And not simply because she felt she sounded like a dork, but also, she knew this feeling. She felt just like this when she had a crush on Kenny, years ago, right down to her heart

racing, stomach doing flip-flops as she put on her shoes and stole a quick glance at herself in the mirror even though they were just taking a walk around the neighborhood and were both going out in their pajamas in the middle of the night.

Well, this is awkward.

Maglor clipped the leash through Huan's collar and they were off.

It was May and winter was coming, but it wasn't cold outside, still comfortable; neither of them needed a jacket, able to go out in short sleeves. Ali felt herself frowning as she watched Maglor cast the glamour over himself, hair suddenly "rolled up" from his thighs to the middle of his back, the glowing turned off. She understood the necessity of it, even though there was likely to be nobody else out there at this time of night, enough that they could go out in their pajamas, it still bothered her that he had to do it at all. But even when he was trying to present as human, he was still exquisitely beautiful, and Ali couldn't stop stealing glances at him on their way down the street.

Jesus Christ, stop gawping.

Maglor cocked his head to one side. "So what keeps you up tonight?"

Ali gave a nervous chuckle. "Isn't it obvious? This entire week. This entire... everything." She shrugged, hoping she didn't need to elaborate on *finding out Elves are real, that we live with one, that I used to be one, that a god is pissed off at me because I don't want to go back to my old body* out here in the open.

But she didn't. Maglor simply nodded. "It's a lot, I know."

"That's... an understatement."

"Yes. It is." Maglor gave a soft sigh. "I want to tell you it gets easier but Sören and Nicolae still struggle with it, two years later. Even when it makes things finally make sense about certain personality traits and inclinations, and always feeling a bit like a stranger in a strange land... knowledge is power, but that power can be a burden."

"I bet." Ali frowned. "It's unsettling to know that there's more to reality than you ever thought there was... and that we're all players in a sort of cosmic game of chess I never knew I signed up for, and I'm guessing they didn't either."

"No. At least we found our way back to each other again." Maglor looked over at her, and their eyes met, held. Ali felt a shiver down her spine, gooseflesh over her arms even though the night wasn't cold.

They continued walking for a few moments of silence, and then Ali said, "So what keeps you up tonight?"

"Well, I don't need as much sleep as you all do." Maglor laughed softly - even his laughter was musical, pleasant to listen to. Ali found herself smiling at it. "But this week has taken its toll on me as well."

"Yeh, no shit." Ali stopped then and gave into the urge that she'd been fighting, not wanting to overstep bounds - now that she knew they were family, not just by choice but by fate, she lost her reserve, and put her arms around Maglor. Maglor returned the hug, pulling her close, and his arms felt so *right* around her, the wall of his chest so safe, that it brought tears to her eyes. Her arms tightened around him, never wanting to let go.

Maglor kissed the top of her head and for an instant Ali was tempted to tilt her face up and kiss him full on the lips, and she stopped herself. It was one thing to hug him, another thing to go there.

And yet when they pulled apart, her entire body was tingling, her nipples ached and she could feel herself damp. She was embarrassed of reacting to him like this, when it had potential to complicate so much, and things were already excessively complicated. They resumed walking and Ali forced herself to look up at the night sky, the sprinkling of stars - nothing like what she could see in the outback without light pollution but it was still nice.

Then, as if by magic, Ali saw a shooting star. She found herself taking Maglor's arm - getting all tingly again - as she pointed, like an exuberant kid. "Look! Shooting star!" She shook him a little. "Make a wish."

Maglor laughed again. "There is a saying, you know, 'be careful what you wish for'."

"Oh, make a damn wish, you."

Maglor took a deep breath. "Very well." He closed his eyes.

Ali closed her eyes too, even though she wasn't terribly superstitious, but then again, Elves were real, and she had used Uluru to teleport from Australia to England, and she could move things without touching them, just thinking about it, so what did she know? *I want Maglor to be happy.* And then she found that curious, that she was thinking of his happiness before anyone else's, even her children. But then, Maglor had suffered so much, the latest blow so recent.

*It's not like I'm in love with him or anything.*Ali swallowed hard.

Their eyes met again. Ali heard herself breathing harder as she looked into those eyes like silver fire - even glamoured they were beautiful, captivating. Her mouth was getting dry. Her face was burning now, as she felt even more like an idiot, reacting to him like this.

Huan finally yipped and gave them an expectant look, and they took another pause so Huan could do his business. After Maglor cleaned it up - and Ali marveled at the hilarity of an ancient Elf cleaning up dog doo - they turned around and headed back for the house. Once they came closer to the door, Maglor asked, "Do you think you're going to try to get some sleep, or...?"

"I don't think I can just yet," Ali admitted. She glanced over at Maglor. "What about you?"

Maglor shook his head. "I was going to go back to reading but if you're going to be up for awhile you're welcome to keep me company. Actually..." Maglor exhaled sharply. "Would you mind if I practiced the harp? It's been awhile."

"I... wouldn't mind at all." Ali knew this was a very intimate, personal thing for Maglor to be sharing with her - it was one thing for Maglor to perform on other musical instruments and sing in front of an audience, but the harp was where he was most himself. And Ali felt incredibly touched by that; even though she was family, she didn't feel entitled to witness him harping, so being not merely allowed but invited was an honor. Then Ali pursed her lips. "It is very late, though."

"I was going to take it outside and practice there."

"That's a big harp to be dragging outside -"

"I've done it before, Ali. You do realize I've carried that thing around for ages now."

Once again, Ali felt like an idiot. She facepalmed; Maglor chuckled and she laughed too. "Sorry," Ali said.

"Don't be." Maglor grinned at her. "You're having a Nelya moment." His grin got bigger.

"I suppose I am." Ali bit her lower lip. Then she wondered how much of her other reactions to him were "having a Nelya moment".

Since Maglor didn't want her help carrying the war harp out to the garden, but she still felt like she should do *something* to express gratitude for being invited to watch him play, she brought out a pitcher of lemonade and two tumblers. She sat and watched Maglor lug the enormous harp out the patio door and set it up in the garden, and then she became aware she was staring at him again and looked up at the sliver of the waning crescent moon. It was hard to believe that she had once been alive in a time before the sun and the moon lit the sky, when the light of the Trees made day and night. She could almost see it now, the silver glow in darkness, every night like a full moon.

Once Maglor was seated at his harp, her focus turned back to him. Since their garden was fairly secluded and the nearest neighbors weren't very close, it was safe for Maglor to be unglamoured out here, and now Maglor himself was like moonlight, and his light seemed to burn all the stronger as he began to practice scales on his harp, his fingers flowing over the strings so gracefully and elegantly, like watching a ballet dancer dance. Just those hands alone radiated magic, and then Ali saw the look of concentration on Maglor's face, as if he were gathering power to himself. *He's listening for the Song, to decide what to play. What would best suit this moment.* Ali waited, feeling herself almost vibrate with anticipation, barely breathing.

Maglor started with something Ali was familiar with - "Watermark" by Enya. The tender, melancholy song brought tears to Ali's eyes; already he was baring his heart, expressing sorrow as well as love, pain as well as hope. The notes flowed like a river, and Ali couldn't take her eyes off Maglor, transfixed, yet even as she watched him in his intensity, it also seemed like she could see something superimposed over him, fleeting mental images of home, family, those loved and lost.

The next song was "Stairway to Heaven" on the harp. Ali smiled, thinking of Sören and how much he loved this song... and then across their bond Ali could feel Maglor thinking of Sören too. Thinking of Fëanor, as he once was, and the Fëanor of now, the Flame Imperishable still burning bright in Sören's struggles and his journey. Ali could feel how much Maglor loved him, not just the memory of his father as he used to be, but rediscovering that connection all over again. How proud Maglor was of Sören, especially in his display of rage earlier that week, not allowing anyone to disrespect him or his family. The worry Maglor felt for the future ahead of them, with their many, powerful enemies. And that fierce devotion, Maglor's Song sparked by Sören's Flame, that feeling of magic between them, wonder as they walked this path together.

Ali ached in a good way. She was glad that Maglor had that kind of love, after everything.

When the song was over, Maglor took some deep breaths - Ali could see, not just feel, how wrapped up he was in the music. Ali passed him a glass of lemonade and when he was finished, Maglor asked her, "Do you have any requests?"

Ali took a moment to think. As much as it would be cool to hear some of her favorite metal songs on the harp, and she had no doubt Maglor would enjoy playing them, she felt like it was only respectful to want to hear something Maglor had written himself. Of course, he had written so many songs. Ali racked her brain, trying to think of songs she'd seen him compose when she was Maedhros, but titles eluded her.

Except one. That one she was absolutely sure of; that one was canon.

"Can you play the Noldolantë?" Ali asked.

There was a very long pause. Though Maglor was trying to keep his facial expression neutral, Ali could see the furrow of his brow, and she could feel the tension, wound even more tightly than his harp strings. Ali immediately wished she hadn't asked, sensing she'd hit a nerve very hard, and before she could open her mouth to apologize, Maglor said, "I *could*," drawing the words out slowly.

"But." Ali frowned, waiting.

Maglor sighed. He pinched the bridge of his nose, and now he didn't bother to hide his discomfort, looking like he was in pain. Ali poured more lemonade and used the Force to pass it to him. After they drank, Maglor said, "I haven't played it in awhile."

"I'm sure you're not rusty -"

"That's not it." Their eyes met, and Ali knew, of course, that wasn't it. Maglor sighed again. He looked down, then he looked up at the waning crescent moon - and seemingly away, as if he were looking into another time altogether. Then their eyes locked again. "I had made some additions to the song, a couple of years ago." Maglor closed his eyes and winced. "About my son. And about... *him.*"

He didn't need to say the name; Ali knew immediately he was referring to the god.

Maglor gave a bitter, derisive laugh. Now his scowl had become a glare, though not at her. His eyes flashed with anger. "A long time ago, thousands of years ago, I was was wounded in battle. I just wanted to die. And Ingwion wouldn't let me die. He... took care of me." Maglor didn't have to spell out what that meant. "I found the strength to go on, to find you – Maedhros – again and fight for the Silmarils... and I hated him for it. I hated him for the longest time, but when he finally brought me back to Sören, I stopped hating him. I was grateful." Maglor's voice was quiet, but Ali knew it was quiet fury, not calm. "I loved him." Then Maglor's voice rose again. "What he did makes no *sense*. He helped me... and then he wounded me, like this, taking my son away, to punish me because what? I want to be around the family I lost? I don't care what bodies they're in, you all are still *yourselves* to me? Not that there's anything wrong with your bodies..." Maglor's eyes went lower for a moment, and Ali wondered if Maglor was looking at her breasts, and then he quickly looked away, and Ali fought back a smile - now was not the time. And as the fury rose in Maglor again, Ali found herself getting angry right along with him. "So I had *him* in my song. And it feels... polluted now. The entire thing feels like he took a big *shit* all over it..."

"Can you try to... I don't know." Ali felt like an idiot for even suggesting it. "Cut out the part with him in it? Make a new part? Or keep that part in there but then... have a catharsis? Sing of betrayal and hurt, let it out?"

"Obviously, I could. But it feels like the song itself is ruined whether I cut him out of it or I leave him in and then add this... latest development." Maglor shook his head. "The entire

thing is painful."

"I won't force you to play it if you don't want to," Ali said. "But I know that was your, ah..." She searched for the right term. "Magnum opus. It feels like letting him win if he takes it away from you."

The filthy look Maglor gave her made her regret the words out of her mouth, as if he was offended by the sentiment, but Ali felt like she would be doing him a disservice if she wasn't honest. "He's already taken your son away. Taking your *song* away feels... even worse, if that makes sense at all."

"It does," Maglor gritted out. "Believe me, it does. It's like salt in the wound. And again, I don't understand why. Why he would give me hope, why it would look like he was trying to *help us*, just to put the proverbial knife in my back. I've been asking myself over the last few days if it would have been kinder for him to just let me die -"

"*No.*" Ali narrowed her eyes. "Goddammit, Maglor, *no*." Now she went over to him, and took him in her arms again. She grabbed his chin and made him look at her. "You *will not* say things like that. Are you not happy to be reunited with the family you do have, here? I'm not trivializing the loss of your son, I'm not minimizing the hurt. But if we do matter to you, it should mean something that we're all glad you're alive. Yes, he hurt you. Yes, what he did to you was cruel. But you're not better off dead. You have us. You have your father, you have one of your uncles, you have your aunts, you have a few of your brothers and a couple of your cousins right here with you. We are here for you, and you are here for us too - you matter to us. We would not be better off without you. I know Sören certainly wouldn't be. No, what that *prick* did makes no sense, to hold out hope and then hurt you like that. Maybe he genuinely did want to help and he was traumatized by the Dagorath and that changed him. Maybe he was always an arse all along and his help was contingent on us... conforming to his aesthetic, or whatever the hell that speech was on Tuesday. It doesn't really matter why, it matters that he hurt you, that he hurt us. But don't let him break you like this. Don't let this make you wish you were dead... don't let this cut you off from the Song. From *your* song of songs. Things have changed, but the song remains the same. It's still there." Ali put her hand on Maglor's heart.

Maglor rested his head on her shoulder for a moment, and Ali found herself reaching out to him with her free hand, stroking his hair... marveling at the silken texture of it, feeling almost not real in its softness. Then Maglor began to sob, and Ali pulled his head into her chest and started to rock him.

"When we were kids I told you I would protect you," Ali said, remembering that old life, seeing it vividly in her mind's eye. "And obviously I've done a crap job of that, with everything that's happened. But I'm here again, and I'm looking out for you, OK?" Ali picked up Maglor's face and looked him in the eye. "And that means protecting you from yourself, too. You don't get to go down the chasm like I did. You don't get to die. Not physically, and not dying inside, either."

Maglor wiped his eyes, and then he planted a gentle kiss on Ali's brow - Ali felt herself quickening again, heart racing, stomach fluttering, nipples hardening, feeling like flames were licking through her veins. He pulled back, and looked at his harp, breathing harder, a look of determination on his face, like he was about to run a marathon or climb a mountain. Ali knew that look, having seen it many times before in that life as Maedhros.

"You can do it," Ali said. "And you *should* do it. Yes, I know it hurts to engage with that song again after everything, whether he's in it or you cut him out of it. But it's lancing a wound to clean it out, not let it fester. It'll be better in the long run for your family, if not for

yourself."

Maglor gave a little nod and once again he flexed his fingers. He closed his eyes and began to play.

It was the first time Ali had heard the song, and yet she knew it, somehow. Her soul knew it - now she had the mental image of her spirit watching him from the Halls of Mandos, only allowed to look at him every so often, but she did whenever she could... and listened. She didn't recognize the language, as Maglor sang in Elvish, but she knew exactly what he was singing of. And she could see it in her mind's eye, even as she watched Maglor play, it was like they were here and elsewhere all at once, the swirls of his music thinning a veil between worlds, between times.

There was his love for his father, the glory of his creations. His love for his brothers, the fun and the laughter. The beauty of the Silmarils, the theft by Morgoth, the ensuing rebellion, kinslaying and exile. The death of Fëanor by a pack of Balrogs, going up in flame and ash. Fingolfin going on a suicide mission to face Morgoth in single combat, fighting until he could fight no more. Maedhros jumping into the chasm. Wandering endlessly with his shame, his guilt, his regret, haunted by the ghosts of the ones he loved. Sometimes comfortable, but never truly happy.

And then he found Sören, who he loved above and beyond any of the Mortals he'd loved and spent time with, basking in the warm glow of Sören's inner fire. He lost Sören, and was alone again, and was dragged back by someone else he'd shared passion with - someone who then betrayed him. And there was hurt. So much hurt. But the family wove tighter around him, and though his son was lost forever, he had Maedhros once more. Maglor sang of his brother, the hope in being reunited with him after so long... a love that was stronger than the Doom.

Ali started to cry, openly. She buried her face in her hands and sobbed, and when the song died down, she wept harder, doubled over, trying to keep it down for the sake of the people sleeping inside, but she felt as if she could scream with all of the emotions whirling fiercely, the rage at what had happened to their family, the joy at finding each other again, the fear at everything still stacked against them, the pain of knowing at least one reunion was never possible. And the love. She could not deny it now - she loved Maglor. Not just by virtue of their life together as brothers, but here and now, finding him again, getting to know him again.

And that terrified her, even more than whatever it was out there that didn't merely want them dead, the Blood of Fire quenched, but wanted them to suffer as much as possible before that happened. She knew love could be terrible as well as wonderful - it had been love that made her swear that Oath, made her follow her father into exile, made her kill, made her take up the Silmaril even unto unbearable pain. It had been love that had sent one of her brothers in this incarnation to prison, trying to support his family with illegal activity. It had been love that had made Sören Force choke the god in the living room on Tuesday, love that had unintentionally set off a volcano on the other side of the world.

Their eyes met again. "Thank you," Ali whispered. Even though it hurt, it was also magnificent. It was like being invited to watch a force of nature close up - something creative and destructive all at once.

"Thank you," Maglor said softly. "I needed that."

"I know."

But that's not all you need. Ali wanted to love him. Yes, he had Sören and Dooku, but it felt like with all of the years and years and years of *alone*, he was still *hungry*, and Ali felt herself responding to that need.

Or, almost. She couldn't cross that line yet, or ever. She didn't even know if it would be welcome - Maglor kept himself tightly shielded, as if letting anyone see too deeply inside him would burn them alive - let alone the other issues that igniting that spark could cause.

But she felt that hollow, just by virtue of having had so much love in his life and then losing it, and it was never quite the same until comparatively recently, and his deep, deep sorrow had carved out a greater need than before. It didn't help that he had in fact come to love that violet-eyed prick, and been so badly hurt by him. Ali fought the urge to hunt him down, knowing that she was just a Mortal and there wasn't much she could actually do.

Ali looked at the time on her cell phone. "Shit. I should go to bed." She chuckled. "I'm still not really tired."

"My apologies. I know there's a lot of emotions in the Noldolantë. It's not exactly winding-down-before-bed music." Maglor gave a small, apologetic smile. "I can take a request and see what I can do about helping."

"OK." Ali felt like an idiot yet again for not realizing that Maglor could in fact modulate moods with his music, it was a sort of "superpower" - it was in fact something he'd done for Elrond and Elros way back when, and for Maedhros himself. Ali's heart skipped a beat at the memories. "I suppose I could have asked you for that from the start, but then I wouldn't have gotten to hear the Noldolantë."

"Or encouraged me to... try again." Maglor looked at the harp as if in awe, and then back at Ali. "I feel like I got back a little piece of my soul, just now."

"*Good.*" Ali squeezed his arm. "Don't let the bastards win. Or one in particular."

Maglor snorted. "I think calling him a bastard is an insult to bastards."

Ali laughed, a genuine laugh. It was good that he could make a joke. Then Maglor looked at her expectantly, and she knew he was waiting for that one last request of a bedtime song.

"Enter Sandman," Ali said.

Now it was Maglor's turn to laugh, a full-bodied laugh that Ali loved even as she worried it would wake everyone up in the house, if they weren't already woken up by her crying, or Maglor's playing. "That's a unique choice of lullaby."

"Yeh, I think I told you I sang it to the kids when they were small. Well, smaller." Sometimes it was hard to believe Metallica and Megadeth were only six; they felt older. Of course, now Ali knew why.

Maglor began to pluck out "Enter Sandman" on the harp, a slowed-down, dreamlike version of the song that was surprisingly soothing. Ali felt her eyes get heavier. Maglor followed it up with "Nothing Else Matters" on the harp, and this time he sang along, and Ali felt herself smiling, a stupid, sleepy grin.

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

Those words had never felt truer. The warmth and love in Maglor's voice felt like Ali was being wrapped in a cozy blanket, and her eyes closed. The next thing she knew, Maglor was carrying her inside.

"Wha?"

Maglor was tucking her into bed next to Kenny now. He patted her on his way out. "Sweet dreams, my dear."

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She is in the body of Maedhros again. She and Maglor tuck Elrond and Elros in, and then she watches as Maglor sings them a lullaby and puts them to sleep, like magic. Even though they are asleep before the song is over, Maglor sings it through to the end, and at last he rises up from the chair by their bed and walks over to her. It is time for them to go to bed, as well.

Except, they are not going to sleep right away. They undress each other, kissing, caressing, hands roaming over bare flesh, their cocks rubbing together as they hold each other, kissing more deeply. They walk to their bed and fall in together and they spend awhile just kissing, cock rubbing cock, touching each other, *feeling* each other, needing that comfort after everything. Fingon is gone, but at least there is this, the other man Maedhros loves.

Maglor is kissing his way down Maedhros's body. Not repulsed by the stump of an arm, but is tender and reverent with him everywhere, even there. She feels herself as Maedhros lay back, watches the cock disappear into Maglor's mouth, eyes searing her soul as he sucks hungrily. Before she can come like that, his fingers ready the passage with oil, and now they are kissing again, his cock paused at the entrance.

He slides into her, and nothing else matters. For a little while, all the troubles of their life melt away, consumed by glorious fire.

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Oh shit. We fucked, didn't we.

Ali hadn't had sex dreams that intense in some time. Her nipples were hard through her T-shirt and her panties were drenched. She heard Kenny in the bathroom, and as soon as he came out - fully dressed, ready to start his day - Ali threw a pillow at him.

Kenny came over and playfully bopped her back with the pillow, as she knew he would. "What's that for?"

Ali grabbed him and pulled him down, kissing him hard. "Fuck me. Now."

Kenny laughed and got his T-shirt off as quickly as he could, laughing harder as Ali fumbled with his belt, his jeans. "Now," Ali growled. "Now..."

Kenny kissed her back, stepping out of his jeans, pulling down his boxers. Ali's T-shirt was off and her pajama bottoms and now it was just her panties, and he lowered himself down, taking the waistband in his teeth, peeling her panties off with his teeth, a feral look in his eyes that sent a thrill through her.

"God *damn* you're wet," Kenny whispered once her panties were off and she was spread for him.

"Please," Ali begged.

Kenny dove right in, and Ali grabbed his head, giving a sharp gasp as he started to lap at her just the way she liked it.

Everything was complicated, and had the potential to get *very* fucked up, but there were far worse ways to start a Sunday morning...

Chapter 15

Anthony was right on time. Sören opened the door with his usual smile, always happy to see Anthony, even though he knew today was going to be work - and probably a lot of pain - and not really fun. But his smile faded as soon as Anthony dangled an athletic cup in his face and said, "Here, you're going to need this." That was even worse than what Sören had expected.

Once Sören put the cup on under his shorts, and tightened his man bun, he brought Anthony out to what had become the meditation room. It was long and wide, with plain white walls, and not much on the hardwood floors except a bench and a mat, and a small table where they unloaded bottled water, towels, and some equipment - mouth guards, and Anthony had brought some sort of cushion-like pad. Anthony also took out his cell phone from his pocket and set it down on the table.

Anthony started with having Sören do some breathing exercises and stretching exercises. Then Anthony made him do a workout - Anthony ran around the meditation room and had Sören follow him, then Anthony ran sideways and Sören had to do the same alongside him, then it was time for push-ups. Then they went onto high knee kicks. By the time the drill was over, Sören was already done, but they hadn't even started.

"The difference between Krav and other types of martial arts is here most of all." Anthony pointed to his head. "Other types of martial arts will teach you to be the calm eye in the center of the storm, to be all chill and Zen. While you can certainly learn how to defend yourself, conflicts are to quash quickly, elegantly, as if you are above it all. Krav? Teaches you to go from prey to predator. You are not the calm eye of the storm; you are the storm. You want to make sure your attacker considers attacking you to be the worst mistake of their life."

The hair on Sören's neck and arms stood on end, a shiver down his spine. He thought of his last encounter with Ingwion; he thought of the Valar, and the Aesir, lying in wait. He thought of Justin Roberts. He thought of Katla, exploding when he exploded.

"You have a tremendous amount of anger in you," Anthony said, looking into Sören's eyes. "In Krav, anger is a gift. You're going to learn how to channel that anger to punish those trying to hurt you, or your family. You're not going to fight the rage, you're going to learn to give in."

"Like a Viking berserker."

"Yes." Anthony smiled, but there was something menacing about it. "Before the day is over, you and I will fight. But first..."

Anthony came closer to Sören, standing in front of him, yet still an arm's length away. It was just enough to send another shiver through Sören. Suddenly Sören was a lot more aware of him than before, finding himself looking up and down the length of Anthony's body, clad in a charcoal grey T-shirt and black gym shorts, noticing the veins in his arms, the definition of his biceps and pecs and calves. The body of a soldier. Someone who could probably snap him in two.

Their eyes met again. "Try to touch my shoulders, Sören."

That seemed ridiculously easy, even childish - not at all what Sören would have expected

following Anthony's speech about rage and becoming the predator. But Sören learned very quickly why Anthony was starting with this. Every time Sören reached out, Anthony ducked or dodged. Anthony was quick... too quick. Sören eventually stopped trying to tag and just lunged, trying to grab. He almost fell more than once, as Anthony moved out of the way just in time. But finally, Sören caught him. He got the sense that Anthony might have let him win, but he wasn't going to press it.

"Good," Anthony said. "Now I'm going to try to touch your shoulders. Don't let me."

This was even harder. Anthony got him right away, and after a few attempts at stepping, running out of the way, ducking down, Anthony got him again. "No," Anthony said, shaking his head. "Keep trying." Sören groaned, but continued to dart out of Anthony's reach, this way and that. After another grab, Sören was even more determined to not let Anthony tag him, and moved harder, faster, making Anthony work for it. At last there were enough failed attempts that when Anthony grabbed him again, Anthony nodded and said, "Better."

They took some more deep breaths, and then Anthony showed Sören what he called the "neutral stance" - legs shoulder-width apart, arms down, imperfect footing. "Like you're just out in public, minding your own business, not aware an attack is about to happen," Anthony said. He then changed his posture and explained what he was doing. "This is the fighting stance. Your power leg goes behind, your hands are raised with thumbs at chin level, elbows near the ribs, now position the palms outward."

Sören imitated what Anthony was doing and Anthony nodded. "We're going to drill, changing from neutral stance to fighting stance. This will help you to get ready to counterattack as quickly as possible."

That was what they did for the next five minutes, going faster and faster. The first several tries felt awkward and Sören knew he wasn't moving quickly enough, but soon it became easier for him, more natural, more automatic. When Anthony was satisfied, he nodded and said, "It's time to learn the first punch."

They made the fighting stance, then Anthony performed a straight punch off of his front arm, rotating his front foot, extending his arm while turning his fist. Sören did the same. They repeated it ten times, then Anthony grabbed the pad from the table and held it against him. "Try it on me," Anthony said.

Sören felt a little hesitant about hitting Anthony, even with a protective pad in place, but he knew that was literally what he was here for. He took a deep breath and after assuming the fighting position, he made a straight punch, aiming for Anthony's face, blocked by the pad.

"Again," Anthony said. "Harder. You're not doing it hard enough."

Sören hit harder, and harder. After a few more hits Anthony lowered the pad and said, "Good."

"Now do I hold that while you punch?" Sören asked.

"No. I don't need to practice punching." Anthony grinned.

Sören felt like an idiot; Anthony patted him on the shoulder. The little touch made Sören tingle. Anthony said, "I'm going to teach you how to stop me from hitting you."

"Oh." Once again, Sören felt like an idiot. That only made sense.

They went through the drill step by step, slowly. Anthony approached, and pulled Sören's arms outward, with Sören's elbows slightly bent, fingers extended. Anthony guided Sören's forearm to his attacking arm, so Anthony couldn't hit Sören's face, then he guided Sören's other hand into a fist and made it punch, moving out of the way before the fist could make contact. They did another run-through where Anthony guided him again, and then another run-through where Anthony didn't motor him through but Sören still went slowly and stopped just short of his fist making contact with Anthony's face. Then Anthony handed them each a mouth guard, and this time they went through the drill at full speed. Anthony moved out of the way just as Sören's fist struck, and he nodded, giving the thumbs up.

Anthony took out the mouth guard. "Now we're going to work on kicking." Anthony grabbed the pad again. "Since this is for real-world self-defense, aiming below the belt is encouraged."

"You mean..."

"Yes, it's time for the groin kick. You lean slightly backward and push your hips forward." Anthony held the pad to his crotch. "Go."

Sören kicked, aiming for the balls, and then again. "Harder," Anthony said. "Act like you want to cut me in half."

Sören was already worn out, and wanting a break. He channeled his frustration with himself, and the *necessity* of this, into the next kick. Harder and harder. Sören breathed a sigh of relief when Anthony took the pad down and nodded. "Good."

"Are we done for today?"

"Not just yet. Now you're going to put it all together." Anthony grabbed the mouth guards again. "You're going to work on punching and kicking." Anthony grabbed the pad.

Sören went back and forth between punches and kicks, fast and frenzied, his adrenaline pumping. Suddenly the meditation room started to fade, and Anthony, and memories were superimposed over it. The abuse of Justin Roberts. Odin killing his mother. Manwë's Doom, and the death of each of Fëanor's sons save Maglor, wandering endlessly, alone. Fingolfin falling at the feet of Morgoth. Finarfin slain by Loki in Balrog form. Sauron out there, somewhere, at large. Odin still out there. Whoever, whatever, took Dag. Sören felt a primal, ancient fury unleashed in him, taking it out with every swing of his fist, chop of his leg. He was done with people harming him or his family.

He was just done. Sören groaned, angry with himself as his body started to give out. He wanted to keep going, but this was all too new to him, too much for one day.

Anthony threw down the pad, steadied him, and helped him over to the water. They sat on the bench together and Anthony used the Force to throw a towel at Sören. Breathing hard, Sören took his hair out of the man bun and shook it loose.

After a few gulps of water Sören gasped out, "How did I do?"

"Well, it was your first day, so you were... typical of someone having their first day in Krav." Anthony smiled. "There's a lot more to learn. A lot more. But you'll get there."

"God, there's more?"

Anthony nodded solemnly. "Lots of other moves to show you."

Sören's mind went right into the gutter, even as tired as he was, and he shoved away the mental image of Anthony on top of him, his legs on Anthony's shoulders. Sören dabbed sweat running down his face. "Jesus."

"I have to say, though..." Anthony raised an eyebrow. "Well, there's two things."

"Oh?"

"The first is that... well..." Anthony gestured to Sören. "You're going to need to get your endurance up. Which means some sort of fitness regimen."

Sören grimaced, remembering his youth as a runty, asthmatic boy who was always picked last for teams during mandatory sports in school. "I was born without the sports gene."

"I'm not talking about a sport. I'm talking about some sort of workout plan, something to get your body moving. There's a lot of different things you can do in that vein. Running, swimming, weight training... but you need to do *something.*" Anthony took a swig of water. "I run every day, regardless of weather."

"That had to be interesting on a sub." Sören remembered Anthony telling him he commanded a nuclear submarine.

Anthony nodded. "We actually had a workout room on my sub. And a sauna."

Sören's mind went into the gutter again, thinking about Anthony in a sauna, wearing nothing but a towel, hair damp, glistening with sweat. He thought about what it would be like to take a sauna with Anthony. As exhausted as he was, his body was craving sex now. *God dammit. Seriously?*

"So yes, even under the sea, I worked out every day," Anthony said. "And it's not just good for the body, but..." Anthony tapped Sören's forehead. "Getting your endorphins going might help."

Sören fought the urge to reply with *I highly doubt that*, having been plagued by depression since he was a child. He was so used to pervasive melancholy that he'd come to accept it as a part of his life. So Sören said nothing, just sipped his water.

"So that's the first thing, is you getting into some kind of workout regimen. Ideally, I'd like you to figure something out within the next two weeks, which gives you a little time for trial and error, finding out what works for you, but really..." Anthony gave him a stern look. "Find something."

"OK." Sören scowled, feeling self-conscious about his lack of fitness compared to Anthony's... and then feeling self-conscious about feeling self-conscious. *Why do you even care what he thinks?* "What's the other thing?"

Anthony sighed. "One of the techniques you learn in Krav is how to disarm an attacker with a gun. Of course, it doesn't make a lot of sense to take a gun from an attacker if you don't know how to use it. So I'd really like you to learn to use a gun."

Sören snorted. "I can use a sword."

"Have you ever heard the expression, 'bringing a knife to a gunfight?' That's exactly what you're telling me here. I highly doubt you walk around out there every day with a sword strapped to your body. Whereas, you should, in fact, have a gun and keep it on you, after what happened to your brother. I will reiterate: I will do everything in my power to protect you, that is my job, but I also need you to learn to protect *yourself* if something happens and I'm not here, or I can't get to you in time." Their eyes met again. "I can teach you to use a gun, I can take you to a range. But I'm not going to force you. I can only strongly suggest it. And I know this is making you uncomfortable -"

Sören nodded, remembering the time Justin had threatened him with a gun. Remembering Einar had a gun when he was a child. He didn't like guns.

"I'll drop the subject for now, but please consider it."

That was, of course, when Sören noticed Maglor was standing in the doorway of the meditation room. Sören wondered how long he'd been there.

"Sorry," Maglor said. "I was looking for you and followed the direction of your s- voice." He stopped himself from saying *the direction of your Song*just in time.

Sören raised an eyebrow. *How much did you see, or hear?*

Not much. Just enough.

Sören knew where Maglor was concerned that could mean a lot of different things, all of which were probably going to lead to some kind of discussion later. Sören rolled his eyes and chugged on his bottle of water.

"Well," Anthony said, glancing at Maglor and then back at Sören, shifting like he felt suddenly awkward, "that about wraps it up for today." He got up and Sören stood up as well, and Anthony shook Sören's hand; once again, Anthony's touch made Sören feel all hot and tingly, his stomach fluttering. As their eyes met, Sören's mouth went dry. "You have a lot of potential, but please do take into consideration what I said."

"OK." Sören glanced at the doorway; Maglor had left. He looked back at Anthony and found himself licking his lips. He nervously rubbed his curls, which were damp with sweat. "Um, when are we doing it again?" *God. Mind, gutter.* "Next practice."

Anthony used the Force to bring over his cell phone and pulled up his calendar. He and Sören looked at it together. "I'm flexible," Anthony said.

I bet. Sören stopped himself from saying it out loud. "How many times a week should we..."

"Ideally I'd like to go for three times a week but with you just starting out, twice a week is fine until you gain more endurance."

"So Friday, then?" Sören thought it was going to take him at least that long to recover from this session; once again he felt ready to keel over.

"Friday at one?"

"That works for me."

"OK, good." Anthony smiled.

"Are you sure you don't want to stay for a bit -" The thought of Anthony leaving so suddenly made Sören feel sad, even though Anthony had run him into the ground.

"Marcus was looking for you, so I should let you attend to that." Anthony lingered for a moment and then he began to walk out of the meditation room, looking once over his shoulder to wave. "See you Friday, Sören."

Sören caught his breath and gingerly made his way from the meditation room to the kitchen. Through the glass patio doors Sören saw Maglor tossing a ball to Huan, and then Maglor looked through the doors at him, stopped what he was doing, and came inside.

"You're home early," Sören remarked.

"I felt a disturbance in the Force." Maglor raised an eyebrow. "Then I realized it was you."

Sören couldn't help laughing at that. He rubbed his beard, feeling a little sheepish. "Sorry."

"Well... I suppose better that than another volcano going off."

"Yeah." Sören stared at his feet.

Maglor picked Sören's chin back up and looked into his eyes, stroking Sören's cheek tenderly. "I worry about you."

"I'm fine." Sören looked away.

"You're not fine. You haven't been fine since -"

Maglor didn't need to say it. "You haven't been fine either, Kanafinwë."

"No, but I'm used to not being fine."

Sören sighed. He reached out instinctively and pulled Maglor into a tight hug, feeling for him. After everything he'd gone through - the loss of his father, his brothers, his uncle - and wandering for eons, getting attached to Mortals just to see them die, the brief hope of reunion with his son and having it taken away so bitterly seemed like one of the biggest injuries done to Maglor and Sören *hurt* for him. Maglor had been trying very hard to contain his pain in a house full of Force-sensitives, but even through the shielding Sören could feel it. Sören's mind's eye replayed the vision of the Dagorath when they had been out on the Ring Road, Fingolfin and Finarfin vaporized, Fëanor's "nothing left to lose" rage where he became a supernova made flesh. Sören had been horrified by that, then, even as much as he loved Dooku and would kill for him, would die for him. That Fëanor had destroyed a universe, and Sören did not want to think of himself as being *like that*. And yet here and now, feeling just the faintest echo of Maglor's grief and rage, Sören wanted to burn cities to the ground.

He also just wanted to *burn*. Maglor had been alone for so long. Even though he'd had love in his life these last couple of years, and touch, it seemed to Sören that he needed - deserved - even more. Sören wanted to ease his pain the best way he knew how. He couldn't make Maglor forget, nor would that be fair. But at least for a little while they could go elsewhere, if Maglor was willing. Sören was tired, but he still wanted to offer himself,

let Maglor take what he needed.

They pulled apart; Maglor smiled, tousling Sören's sweat-damp curls. "You're all sweaty, Ada."

"Maybe I should take a shower." Sören bit his lower lip. "Care to join me?"

Maglor followed him into the shower. But as soon as the water came on, Maglor noticed Sören leaning on the wall to hold himself up and he shook his head. "You need some rest."

Sören made a noise of complaint.

"Rest", of course, meant no sex in the shower, but it was still sensual, the two of them lathering each other, melting into the other's touch. Sören especially loved washing Maglor's hair, playing with the full length of it. Maglor unglamoured in the shower was a feast for his eyes, and as tired as Sören was, he couldn't help his arousal at the sight of him, the thrill of worshiping Maglor's beauty with his hands.

When the shower was over, they dried off and then Maglor carried Sören to bed. Sören watched as Maglor combed his wet hair, and then Maglor came over and combed Sören's wet curls. Sören smiled and leaned into it, rewarded by Maglor's free hand petting him. At last Maglor climbed in bed beside him and the feel of skin on skin, Maglor's arms around him, was one of the best feelings in the world. Maglor kissed Sören's brow and began to rock him gently. "You need rest," Maglor repeated, more insistent.

Sören blew a raspberry, but within minutes, he went out like a light.

He came to a couple of hours later. Maglor was still in bed next to him, watching him sleep. Maglor smiled when Sören opened his eyes, and rained kisses over his face.

"Hi," Sören said.

"Hi."

Sören yawned and stretched. "That was a nice little nap."

"You needed it."

Sören went hard at the feel of Maglor's body against his, the sight of him. "There's something else I need now, and I think you need it too."

Wordlessly, Maglor claimed Sören's mouth with his, and they both moaned as their tongues met, swirling, playing. Sören moaned again as Maglor's hands slid over his naked body, and he cried out as Maglor began to kiss and lick Sören's neck, knowing how sensitive he was there. A hand caressing Sören's chest strayed to tease a pierced nipple, rubbing in slow, lazy circles before pinching it, then rubbing some more. Maglor nibbled on Sören's shoulder. "What do you need, Ada?" Their eyes met and Maglor smirked, knowing perfectly well what it was. "Hm? Tell me..."

"You," Sören said, his voice husky from sleep and emotion. "I need you." Sören reached out to stroke Maglor's face, his hair.

They kissed again, and it was like the life they'd shared in Reykjavik starting over a decade ago... like the forbidden love they'd shared in the Years of the Trees, when Maglor

was of age. With each kiss time seemed to blur, where the past was present... and so was the future. Nothing would come between them again. As difficult as his training would be, Sören would do it to keep his family safe, and together. He would do it for Maglor, who had already had too much taken away. Fëanor's favorite son, though he'd tried not to have favorites. *My Song.*

Sören rolled Maglor onto his back, and they kissed as their hard cocks rubbed together. Sören kissed, licked, and nibbled down Maglor's throat, making Maglor moan, each moan sending a shiver through him, making his cock throb. Sören kissed and licked the hollow of Maglor's shoulder, then kissed and licked his way down Maglor's chest and stomach, coming up the other side to kiss and lick the other shoulder, and back down to work on his nipples, fingers and thumb rubbing and pulling one nipple as he lapped, suckled and bit the other. Maglor's moans got louder, and he bucked against Sören more insistently, nails digging into Sören's hips. Sören tugged a nipple with his teeth before laving, then the other, looking into Maglor's eyes, captivated by the look of heat, the look of pure animal *need*.

Sören licked a trail down to Maglor's navel, and then he licked and licked at Maglor's thighs, as Maglor grabbed the headboard, white-knuckled. Sören hovered above Maglor's cock, breathing in the scent, and his tongue darted out to lick the slit, slowly, deliberately. He just licked and licked at the slit, watching Maglor's reactions, his own cock pulsing, balls aching. Then his tongue swirled around and around the head, before he sucked just the head of Maglor's cock into his mouth. He sucked slowly, working his tongue as he sucked. Maglor shuddered, and now his hands were in Sören's hair. "Ada..."

"Mmmmmm." Sören drew more of Maglor's cock into his mouth, still sucking slowly. One hand reached up to rub Maglor's stomach in slow circles, the other reached down to gently cup and rub Maglor's balls. Sören's own cock jolted, and again when Maglor's hand covered the hand rubbing his stomach, slid down to caress Sören's arm. Just that little touch almost set Sören off, and Sören moaned with his mouth full, feeling himself drip precum into the sheets.

"Ada." Maglor grabbed Sören's curls and pulled Sören off his cock. "Let's do this together."

Sören came up to kiss him, whimpering into the kiss as their cocks slid together once more, and Sören felt Maglor's cock drip precum onto his cock. With a reluctant groan they pulled apart and Sören shifted position on top of Maglor, his knees against Maglor's shoulders, cock and ass in Maglor's face, as he dove back down to take Maglor's cock in his mouth again.

When Maglor began to suck Sören's cock, Sören almost came right away, pent up, but made himself hold back. The sensation intensified more and more deliciously as Sören and Maglor sucked each other. Slow, languid sucking became greedy, hungry, and Sören found himself riding Maglor's face. Then Maglor took Sören's cock out of his mouth and just licked it, teasing, making Sören scream with mingled frustration and pleasure around the cock filling his mouth. Maglor started to lick the sensitive place between Sören's balls and ass and Sören's nails dug into Maglor's thighs, screaming again. At last Maglor was licking at Sören's opening, and then his tongue was inside, lashing at that sweet spot. Sören whimpered with his mouth full, sucking Maglor's cock even harder, faster, needy.

Maglor devoured Sören, groaning, as Sören continued to suck. They got closer, trembling. Sören pulled Maglor's cock from his mouth to catch his breath, hearing himself gasp with pleasure. Sören gave the cock a few more licks before he started sucking again, and a moment later Maglor stopped licking inside him and patted Sören's ass, a signal to climb down.

Maglor rolled Sören onto his back, his eyes fierce. He dove down and took a last few licks at Sören's cock, making a show of collecting the precum on his tongue before he kissed Sören deeply. Sören used the Force to pull over the lubricant from the bedtable, and Maglor slicked his fingers and worked them into Sören, one finger, two, then three, as he kissed and licked Sören's nipples. His gaze locked with Sören's as he tugged the nipple rings with his teeth before licking the nipple again, faster, harder, fucking it with his tongue. Sören writhed underneath him, and began to beg. "Please, Maglor, please... please, I need it..."

Maglor gave in, kissing Sören again before he guided the tip of his cock to Sören's channel. They both cried out as Maglor pushed inside, and Sören sighed once Maglor bottomed out in him. Maglor's hands roamed over Sören's chest, up and down, coming back up to play with the nipples as he leaned down to kiss Sören again, and took his first few thrusts.

They started slow, eyes locked, foreheads together, noses rubbing, breathing each other's breath. Sören could feel the power between them, Flame and Song, how much they both needed this, needed each other. Sören reached out to touch Maglor's face, wanting Maglor to feel how much he was loved, wanted. How much Maglor's defense of his decision to stay with the humans he cared for had touched him, even though it cost Maglor dearly. Maglor's mouth met Sören's again and they kissed passionately; Sören's arms locked around Maglor's back as Sören's legs wrapped around his waist, holding Maglor with all of him.

If I am your home, let me be your sacred space. Your safe space."I know you need this too," Sören whispered. "Take what you need, Kanafinwë."

"Ada..." Maglor's mouth crushed his. Their tongues played harder, faster, and Maglor began to rock into Sören. Sören matched his rhythm, bucking underneath him. Soon Maglor was driving into him, biting Sören's shoulder, growling. Sören's nails raked Maglor's back, and he grabbed a length of his hair, pulling.

"Just like that," Sören panted, loving the way Maglor's cock rubbed inside him, the ferocity of Maglor's teeth in him, the slap of Maglor's balls against him. Maglor's eyes looked up and locked with his, and Sören moaned, a shiver going through him at that sexy, hungry gaze. Maglor kissed him again and Sören whimpered into the kiss, grabbing Maglor's firm ass, bouncing underneath him, wanting this as badly as Maglor did.

And Maglor wanted, his desire and passion clear and powerful with each thrust, each grunt, each growl. They kissed again and again, the kisses adding to the pleasure of the way their bodies fit together, the friction building to fever pitch. Sören needed to come, but he couldn't get enough, utterly lost in the hot, wild fuck. Lost in the feeling that they were something more than themselves in that moment, enacting some sort of ancient creation magic, their light sweeping away the dark.

Sören was right on that edge; Maglor reached down and began to stroke Sören's cock, knowing from years of experience how Sören liked it. His thumb rubbed the sensitive frenulum as he stroked. Sören cried out and bit his lip, shuddering. "So close..."

"Yes, Sören. Come for me, love."

Maglor's voice sent Sören into an exquisite orgasm. With each blast of his seed, Sören felt like he was flying, a propulsion into the clouds. Sören heard himself moaning, and a few seconds later he was joined by Maglor, calling out "Sören. Fëanor. Ada..." as Maglor

shook against him and Sören felt the hot flow inside him.

They gasped for breath together and kissed, rocking each other. Sören collected some of his seed on his fingers and pushed them into Maglor's mouth; the sensual look of enjoyment on Maglor's face as he tasted made Sören shiver, but he was too spent for now, still recovering from Krav Maga practice.

The orgasm was intense, and their feral, needy fuck had been a sort of catharsis, enough that now Maglor began to cry. Sören pulled Maglor into his chest, pet his hair, and made soothing noises. "I love you," Sören whispered. "I love you.."

"I love you." Maglor picked his face up and gave Sören a sad smile, raining kisses over his face before a few more sobs. Sören kissed his tears, kissed the tip of his nose. "I love you so much." Maglor stroked Sören's face, his curls, skritched Sören's beard. "I'm so sorry I left..."

"Oh, Maglor, we've already been over this." Sören kissed Maglor's forehead, not wanting him to beat himself up, even though Maglor leaving in 2014 had indeed done damage. "You know I forgive you -"

"I know. But if I hadn't left, you wouldn't have crossed paths with that... Justin Roberts." Maglor's nostrils flared. "And I wouldn't have had to come back with..." Maglor couldn't even bring himself to say the name.

"I don't blame you for him," Sören said.

"I still don't understand it." Maglor closed his eyes and trembled, tears spilling down his cheeks, and when he opened his eyes they were haunted, faraway, before his eyes met Sören's again. "He took away *my son.*"

"I know." Sören felt that anger rise in him all over again. He took some deep breaths, not wanting to cause another disturbance in the Force. "I know."

"And... it just seems so..." Maglor made a vague hand gesture. "Of all the reasons to go back in time and alter history... he couldn't have killed Hitler? Or stopped Donald Trump from becoming President of the United States?"

Sören laughed, even though he immediately felt guilty for doing so. Maglor didn't seem offended that Sören had laughed. Then Sören scowled, the anger coming back. "Well, of course not, because we're paltry Mortals and all." Sören was never going to let that go.

"Then he wonders why my choice was to stay with you, rather than be with others like him." Maglor's nostrils flared again. "But I still don't get it, why he would *hurt me* like this..."

Sören shrugged. "Maybe he thinks in some ass-backwards way that giving you some sort of pain and suffering will make you stronger and help you 'ascend'. Like you haven't had enough of it in your life already. I don't know, and I won't presume I understand. I just know the damage is done, and you didn't deserve it." Sören stroked Maglor's face again. "And I hope he leaves us alone. I really don't want to add another name to the shit list, I have enough with the Valar and the Aesir, and whoever the fuck has my brother."

Maglor nodded solemnly. "About that..."

"Jæja." Sören exhaled sharply, remembering Maglor standing there at the door of the meditation room. "So when you said you'd heard and seen 'just enough', that could mean

a number of things. What exactly -"

"I saw Anthony encouraging you to learn how to use a gun." Maglor propped himself up on one elbow and gave Sören a thoughtful look. "I agree with him."

Sören frowned.

"Sören, *I* know how to use a gun."

"Jæja, I know." Sören remembered finding the Glock pistol in a hollow book on the coffee table of the cottage Maglor was renting in summer 2019; he remembered the guns that were sent out to them by MI6 when they had to go to Canada to collect Dag's daughters after Dag disappeared.

"I don't mean to sound alarmist, but the world is even more dangerous now than it was a few centuries ago when I learned to use a firearm. It would help my own peace of mind if you were armed and knew what you were doing."

Sören sighed. It was one thing for Anthony to lay the pressure on him by invoking his duty as protector, and feeling like he was doing a bad job at that if Sören didn't know how to protect his own self; Sören liked Anthony. *Too much.* It was another thing entirely for Maglor to bring up his peace of mind, which Sören knew was in fairly short supply.

I would burn cities to the ground for you. I might as well get over my aversion towards guns for you too.

"OK," Sören said.

"OK what?" Maglor raised an eyebrow.

"I'll tell Anthony to start gun lessons for me." Sören rolled his eyes.

Maglor grabbed Sören and squeezed him tight. Maglor pressed his cheek to Sören's for a moment before kissing it, as if Maglor knew somehow this decision was being made in Sören's love for him.

Chapter 16

It was a Thursday afternoon and Ali was getting restless, waiting for the time to come to pick up Megadeth and Metallica from school. She was always a little nervous while they were at school to begin with. After the disappearance of her cousin Dag, Ali had been paranoid about being tracked down as a relative, but Anthony had assured her that MI6 was watching out for them, and a couple of agents were assigned to undercover work at the kids' school to keep a non-obtrusive eye. Even without the worry that whoever took Dag was still at large, Ali still had concerns. Ali and Kenny had taught the kids at a young age that things like being able to move objects with their mind, untouched, and similar displays of power were for at home, with the family, only. And unfortunately, the kids had already experienced prejudice at a young age so they'd learned not everyone in the world was friendly and on their side, and if they were treated badly because of being mixed-race, it would be even worse if others feared their powers. The kids were careful, but Ali nonetheless worried about Megadeth or Metallica slipping and using the Force in public, and every day when they were at school, if Ali's phone rang she jumped, fearing the worst. Just getting them a private tutor seemed like an attractive option, but she was afraid about how the kids would be socialized if they were too isolated.

Kenny and Ali traded off days with who picked up the kids at school, and today it was Ali's turn. She kept looking at the clock. She knew that if she left too early and waited in the parking lot, she'd feel even more restless, and would have the additional worry that she looked suspicious just sitting there in her Land Rover.

Kenny was out grocery shopping and had taken his bicycle, since he hadn't gone bike riding in awhile and he was still upset enough by what had happened a couple weeks ago - they all were - that he thought letting off some steam would help. Sören had taken the girls and Huan on a walk. Ali worried about him, too, but she also recognized that Sören needed to be able to do things without her making a fuss like he was one of her kids, and while he had provided distraction from her concerns about the kids at school for most of the day, she couldn't expect him to be chained to her side, especially when she still managed to fret anyway here and there.

Ali heard a car pull in, and she tensed - it was way too early for Dooku to be back from the restaurant, or Maglor from his musical instruments shop. When she reached out with her mind she felt Frankie's presence in the Force, and she went over to the door and opened it, watching as Frankie came down the path to the front door and Margrét drove off. Ali gave a little sympathetic smile as she watched a very pregnant Frankie waddle to the door; by the time Frankie made it to the door, she was out of breath.

"Hey," Frankie said.

"Hey yourself," Ali said. She couldn't help but reach down and affectionately tousle Frankie's red pixie cut, and then boop the little button nose. Frankie wasn't just part of the family, but Ali thought she was adorable.

Frankie took a seat in an armchair and looked around. "Would you like something to eat or drink?" Ali asked. "There's fresh lemonade..."

"Ta, lemonade would be lovely." Frankie looked around some more. She bit her lip, which Ali found sexy, and Ali immediately kicked herself internally for thinking that way. But then

she couldn't help glancing at the cleavage in Frankie's scoop-neck T-shirt, before her attention turned to pouring the lemonade.

Ali used the Force to move the glass across the room, carrying her own as she took a seat on the couch. "Sören's not here," Ali said. "He's out for a walk."

Frankie nodded. "Yeah, he wasn't expecting me, I hadn't made an appointment or called first. I just... dropped by. Needed to get out for a bit." Frankie looked down with a little frown and took a sip of her lemonade.

Ali sensed distress. "Well, I don't mind you waiting till he gets back, and in the meantime, I'm here. You want to talk?"

Frankie shrugged. "I don't want to bother you."

"You're not a bother." Ali gave her a stern look. "So go on then, out with it."

"Right." Frankie leaned back in her chair, closed her eyes, and then opened them, looking incredibly sad. Ali fought the urge to go over and give her a hug, and that was just from the look on her face. Pumpkin came out from the cat tree and hopped on Frankie's lap with an inquisitive chirp, purring loudly, as if she knew Frankie was upset. Frankie chuckled and began stroking the cat, then she frowned again. "It's just. You know. Everything."

"Yeh." Ali couldn't even imagine how devastated Frankie must feel, being abandoned by Flóki when she was this far into her pregnancy. It didn't matter that it wasn't his, there had still been an agreement to raise the child as a family. And now there wasn't. "I'm so fucking sorry, Frankie."

"So am I." Frankie looked down at her stomach and patted it. "I just... don't understand... why. Did he find me repulsive? Did he freak out over becoming a sort of parent? Does he suddenly just hate all humans in general and it's not personal but it totally fucking is? I don't get it, I have so many questions that will never be answered. And the baby's on the way and I can't afford to be a fucking mess like this." Frankie rubbed her face and resumed stroking the cat, tears in her eyes. "Margrét's not doing great either. And I feel like us being around each other just reminds the other of *him*, and..."

"Oh god." Ali felt even worse for her. It was one thing to be left by Flóki, it was another thing for Margrét and Frankie's dyad to be destabilized by him being gone, since they'd both been involved with him. Ali had heard that many relationships did not survive the loss of a child because the other partner was too much of a reminder, and she wondered how that held up for triads and other poly arrangements losing a partner.

And that thought terrified her, as her thoughts immediately went to Maglor and how she was starting to feel about him, and back, and she found herself staring at Frankie, who was really cute. Ali gulped down her lemonade, feeling like an idiot, not knowing what to say. Wanting to offer comfort and not knowing how.

"I just..." Frankie made a vague hand gesture. "Feel like I'm going to pieces, and this is absolutely the wrong time for that, and everything's so overwhelming, and..." Frankie started to cry.

Pumpkin meowed with concern and headbutted Frankie's face. Frankie skritched the cat, but also cried harder. "If the cat's getting upset, imagine how my kid will feel seeing me like this..."

"Oh, luv." Ali sighed. She got up from the couch, came over, and got down on her knees beside the armchair to put her arms around Frankie, holding her tight. Frankie started to cry on Ali's shoulder, and Ali let her, stroking her hair, rocking her a little. Pumpkin gave a chirp and headbutted Frankie again, and when Frankie picked her head up, Pumpkin put her front paws on Frankie's shoulder and began to lick her face, as if to kiss her tears.

"You're a good kitty," Frankie said, skritching and stroking the cat some more. Then Pumpkin got down, and Ali pulled Frankie close.

"Let it out. It's OK."

"I hate this. I'm sorry."

"You have nothing to apologize for. You're not the one who needs to apologize." Ali exhaled sharply, wishing she had yelled at Flóki when he'd been in this very same living room. Wishing she'd punched him, not that it would have really done anything.

"I don't want Sören to see me like this. I don't want to make him cry too -"

"Well, at least you know he's understanding. And he wouldn't judge you for feeling this way." Their eyes met. "It might even be therapeutic for him, to have someone else to grieve with."

Frankie shrugged. "I still don't want to spring that on him. I was an idiot for coming here -"

"No, you weren't." Ali gave her a stern look. "You were hoping to get some sort of comfort or relief. And you deserve that." Ali patted her. She used the Force to pass over a box of tissues from the coffee table. "Anyway, I don't think you should worry about Sören seeing you in a bad way, he wouldn't want you to hide that from him, and it's not like he couldn't feel it, anyway, but..." Ali looked at the clock. "I have an idea. I need to go pick up the kids at school. You want to come with me? Then maybe we can go somewhere for a bit, so when you come back here you're a little calmer."

"Oh... OK." Frankie nodded, dabbing her tears with a tissue.

Frankie got in the passenger seat of the Land Rover, and Ali put on hair metal - it was harder to cry and be upset with hair metal playing - and they made the short drive to where Metallica and Megadeth went to school. Ali and Frankie sat in the Land Rover, and when she saw the kids coming out of the front door in the queue of classmates, Ali honked and waved. Megadeth and Metallica waved back, and ran to the Land Rover.

"Hi, Mum. Hi, Aunt Frankie," the kids said in unison. Even though Frankie was Ali's cousin-in-law, she was still "Aunt Frankie" to them, just like Sören and Maglor were "Uncle", and Dooku was "Grampa".

"Hey," Ali said as they piled into the backseat. "How was school?"

"Boring," Metallica said; the kids were gifted and talented and that, too, was something Ali was worried about, was if they were being held back too much in their age group.

"Well, *I* liked it," Megadeth said.

"You would," Metallica said, and gave her brother a noogie.

Ali gave them a look in the rearview mirror, and then she said, "We're not going straight home. I thought we might go get some ice cream and then if there's somewhere you want to go..."

"Can we go to Bondi Beach?" Megadeth asked.

"Yeh! The beach!" Metallica yelled, clapping her hands.

At least they could agree on that much. Ali turned the stereo back up and "Livin' On A Prayer" by Bon Jovi came on. The kids had heard the song enough times that they were able to sing along with the chorus:

She says, we've got to hold on to what we've got
It doesn't make a difference if we make it or not
We've got each other and that's a lot for love
We'll give it a shot

Whoa, we're half way there
Whoa, livin' on a prayer
Take my hand, we'll make it I swear
Whoa, livin' on a prayer

Frankie started to have a gigglefit at the kids singing along with Bon Jovi - Ali couldn't help but notice that she was especially cute when she laughed, her face lighting up - and then Frankie teased, "Glad you're teaching your kids important life skills like... Bon Jovi lyrics."

"It's one of the most important life skills of all," Ali said, grinning.

"Pour Some Sugar On Me" by Def Leppard started just as they reached the ice cream place, and Ali felt a little guilty about turning it off, but she made a mental note to restart it when they got back in the Land Rover. Everyone got out and formed a queue. "I'll treat," Ali said, looking at Frankie.

"Oh, I mean, I have money -"

"It's OK. I dragged you along."

Frankie smiled and patted her, and leaned on Ali - Ali had a foot on her and couldn't help grinning, it was kind of a comical sight. The kids gave both of them a hug, and Ali savored the moment. Frankie felt like part of the family too.

The ice cream stand had only soft-serve. Metallica and Megadeth both got small cones; Metallica's was vanilla with cherry dip, and Megadeth got chocolate with chocolate sprinkles. Frankie and Ali both got large cones, Frankie got chocolate with cherry dip and Ali got vanilla with rainbow sprinkles. It was a nice enough day that the benches on the stand's lot were all full, mostly of young adults, so even though Ali didn't like people eating in the Land Rover, they got back in. Ali restarted "Pour Some Sugar On Me", and everyone sang along with the chorus:

Pour some sugar on me
Ooh, in the name of love
Pour some sugar on me
C'mon, fire me up
Pour your sugar on me

I can't get enough

Then Frankie facepalmed, shaking with silent laughter.

"What?" Ali raised an eyebrow.

"This isn't really an appropriate song for kids, is it?"

Ali snorted, realizing that the lyrics were a bit suggestive. "Well, no, but I grew up listening to this too. I was also singing along when I was their age." Ali sighed, missing her dad, wondering how her parents were doing. Wondering how her brother Darren was doing, newly out of prison and helping on the farm. "This is still pretty tame by today's standards."

"Yeah, it is." Frankie frowned. "That's another thing I'm worried about too, is... the baby being raised right. Having to worry about my language, and..."

"Eh, I wouldn't worry that much." Ali grinned, thinking of growing up hearing her father's foul mouth. "Besides, this is Australia. People will think there's something wrong if your kid doesn't say 'cunt' by a certain age."

Frankie doubled over laughing, while Metallica and Megadeth said "ooooh" from the back. Ali felt ever so slightly guilty, but not by much. Then Ali said, "Besides, it's only words. I would be more concerned with, you know, raising the kid to be respectful of other people, and that sort of thing." Ali couldn't resist. "Making sure their taste in music doesn't suck."

Ali could understand why Frankie was worried, though; she had much the same concerns when she was pregnant with the twins. Ali still sometimes worried about her own parenting skills and she knew those worries would intensify as the kids got older - it was only normal. Ali felt a little weird giving parenting advice when she barely felt qualified to be a parent herself. But Frankie felt really keyed up about it, and Ali wanted to be reassuring. Ali sensed that because Frankie's own background had been rough, Frankie was concerned about avoiding the mistakes her own mother made.

Frankie was quiet on the way to the beach, just eating her ice cream and staring out the window, looking pensive. She had stopped crying, but she still looked sad.

At the beach, Ali popped the trunk - she habitually kept blankets and things like sand toys in the trunk for when the kids went on impromptu trips to Bondi Beach. It was a bit of a walk from the parking lot to the beach itself, and once on the beach, Ali began to scout for a good spot that was neither too close to the water nor too far, and not too crowded. On a Thursday afternoon, the beach wasn't as crowded as the weekend, and it was May and thus not as crowded as it would be in December through February when all the Northern Hemisphere tourists came to enjoy Australian summer, but there were still a fair amount of people. Ali smiled at the sight of surfers riding the waves, and thought of Kenny out there grocery shopping, wishing he was here; Kenny had grown up in California and learned how to surf at a young age, and one of his favorite things about living in Sydney was the chance to surf more regularly at Bondi Beach, something he hadn't gotten a lot of outlet for when they lived in Adelaide.

When they found a spot, the kids spread a blanket and got to work building in the sand. Frankie looked longingly at the waves, and Ali thought then of Maglor, wandering along the seashore, and thought to herself *He should be here too.* And then her face burned as she looked at the shirtless men and thought of Maglor shirtless, and the nice eye candy that would make. *Oh god, stop thinking about him like that. Jesus.*

"I wish I'd brought a bathing suit," Frankie said, and then she looked away from the waves and at the "beautiful people" with toned bodies who tended to frequent Bondi Beach, then down at her belly, and grimaced. "Or not."

"Oh, luv." Ali scowled. "Don't talk about yourself like that."

Frankie sighed. "I keep wondering if, you know." Frankie gestured to her pregnant belly. "I was never thin before I got pregnant, and now I look like..." Frankie gestured to people playing with a beach ball some meters away. "That. I keep thinking that's why he left..." Frankie fell apart again, weeping. "Oh Jesus. Here I am crying at the fucking beach. Who cries at the beach?" Frankie sobbed harder.

"Maglor, probably," Ali muttered, once again thinking of Maglor at the sea, singing with pain and regret of his past, and then her thoughts went back to Frankie's very present pain and regret and she found herself coming closer and hugging the poor girl again. "Hey. Hey. Hey, it's OK."

The kids were staring, and the people closest to them - a man and a woman sunbathing on a towel - sat up, with the man asking, "Is she all right?"

"Yeh, she's fine," Ali said, her arms tightening around Frankie protectively. Then Ali patted Frankie and said, "Come on, let's go for a walk." She glanced at the kids. She didn't like to go too far, but they would be fine so long as they stay put and they kept to a portion of the beach where Ali could keep an eye on them. Ali put an arm around Frankie and led her in the direction of the waves.

They began to walk along the shore, close to the water but not so close that they would get hit by the tide as it rolled in. Ali kept an arm around Frankie, who was still crying but trying to keep it contained. "Now you listen to me," Ali said. "Number one, there is not a thing wrong with you. You're beautiful. People come in all different colors and shapes and sizes and that's a good thing." Ali meant it, it wasn't just a platitude. If anything, Ali meant it a little too earnestly, heat in her cheeks, looking at Frankie's curves. What Frankie didn't know was that Ali had a couple of girlfriends before she and Kenny got together, and earlier into their relationship Ali and Kenny had some threesomes with women - nothing serious, just casual. It had been a long time since Ali had been intimate with another woman, and she found herself missing it from time to time, but not enough to pursue it. Until now.

Ali liked women on the thick, chubby side, and Frankie was just her type. But Ali didn't want to say anything about it. Not only did she feel like it would be creepy, like she was taking advantage of Frankie when she was vulnerable, but she also felt like Frankie needed space to process everything that had happened with Flóki and grieve before taking a new partner, presuming she was even interested, and above and beyond all of that, there was Kenny; they had been effectively monogamous for a few years and she didn't want to rock the boat. Nor did she want to step on Sören's and Margrét's toes.

Even so, Ali took Frankie back into her arms, holding her tight. "You're beautiful," Ali repeated.

"You're just saying that -"

Ali made Frankie look into her eyes. "No, I'm not." Ali pursed her lips and looked away, out at the sea, her face on fire, her heart beating a little faster. Feeling Frankie's breasts pressed against her wasn't helping. *Think of something else, dammit.* Of course, her brain

decided to conjure up another mental image of Maglor shirtless, in swim trunks, hair blowing in the breeze. *God fucking dammit.*

Then Ali thought of Flóki again, and that got her blood boiling. "To all accounts he was fine with your body before he got pregnant, yeh?"

Frankie nodded. "But I mean... I'm even bigger now. And I'm probably going to be bigger than I was even after the baby is born, you know how pregnancy changes a body. That could have tipped him -"

"And if it did, he's a fucking wanker and you're better off without him, and your*baby* is better off without that influence. You don't want that kid raised by someone who's that fucking superficial and thinks it's all right to disrespect women, disrespect people, that way." Ali snorted; her fists clenched as her mind replayed the scene in the living room from earlier that month and she got angry all over again. "But we don't know it was because of that, either. We're not inside his head. It seems he and his buddy there have a problem with mortals, period, regardless of what shape they are. Good riddance, I say. He's a right cunt. You deserve better."

Frankie broke down again. "I try to tell myself that, but... I still miss that cunt." Frankie cried harder. "I hate myself for feeling this way. I shouldn't want him back. I shouldn't -"

"Well, no, but I understand it too. Feelings don't just turn on and off. It's normal that you'd still miss him, and you're probably going to miss him for awhile." Ali rocked her a little. "But just saying, it doesn't really matter *why* he left, it matters *that* he left, and he shouldn't have abandoned you like this, especially not with the baby on the way..."

"No." Frankie cried into Ali's chest. "And... it changed everything. Now he's gone and he's not going to be there to help raise the baby, and it feels like things are falling apart with Margrét, and *I'm* going to pieces... I'm not ready and the baby's coming in just a couple of months, and I feel like I'm going to be a shitty parent, all wrapped up in my grief like this..." Frankie shook her head. She looked up, like she was searching the sky for answers, and then her eyes met Ali's again. "I mean, I'm not saying I want to have an abortion or anything. And I was fine with having the baby before all this happened. But..."

"The thing is," Ali said, trying to keep her tone gentle, the anger out of her voice - she was *furious* with Flóki for leaving Frankie like this, he had to realize what kind of damage he'd be doing, how much it would break Frankie's heart and make her feel overwhelmed and terrified in the face of the baby on the way - "the thing is... you're not having to do this all alone. You know Sören will help, that's his baby too -"

"Yeah, but he already has the girls. I don't want to overload him -"

Ali lowered her voice. "And Nicolae, and Maglor, will help. And Kenny and I can help, too. OK? We're all here for you and the baby. You don't have to do this by yourself."

"I feel bad asking for help at all, like I'm trying to pawn off my responsibility onto other people -"

"Even if this *hadn't* happened, I would still feel like it's *more* responsible to get some help with the baby." Ali sighed, remembering when Metallica and Megadeth were newborns and she felt like she was losing her mind, and Kenny was wonderful with the babies but even so, she wished they'd had extra pairs of hands. "I'm sounding like my mother here, but you've heard the old saying 'it takes a village to raise a child'. The nuclear family is a modern invention, for eons extended families raised a child together, and that's more

natural, more healthy. So you're not doing anything wrong if you let us help you, OK?"

"I still feel like I failed even before it's begun." Frankie scowled.

"No. The fact that you're even this worried about doing the right thing by your baby means you care, and that's at least half the battle with being a decent parent, is just giving a shit." Ali tousled Frankie's hair, and without thinking about it, leaned down and kissed her forehead. She immediately wished she hadn't done that, electricity going through her, and she fought the urge to grab Frankie's face and kiss her mouth. Frankie's cheeks turned pink and she managed a smile, and Ali's stomach fluttered. *Stop being an idiot,* Ali told herself.

Then the baby kicked Ali and Ali gasped, and felt a smile across her face so hard it hurt. Frankie's smile got bigger and she hugged Ali back and, holding each other, they spun around in the sand, crying and laughing together.

"See, the baby agrees with me," Ali said, and reached down to rub and pat Frankie's belly.

Ali glanced out at where Metallica and Megadeth were building a turtle in the sand - they waved at her and she waved back - and then Ali turned to face the ocean, taking Frankie's hand. The sky was a perfect bright blue, with light fluffy clouds, sunlight sparkling on the waves. As beautiful as the ocean was at Bondi Beach, Ali felt a twinge of nostalgia for Ceduna. Frankie heard Ali sigh, and looked over at her.

"I grew up just outside Ceduna, which is in South Australia. An outback town," Ali said. "Gets some tourist activity because it's on the bay. Anyway, I went to the ocean a lot as a kid, especially when I was upset about people being shitty. I'd sit and look at the waves, and remind myself life goes on." Ali squeezed Frankie's hand. "I know everything hurts right now and you feel stuck, but time will pass and eventually, the dust will settle and things will feel less shitty. Everything will work out, somehow."

"I hope so." Frankie squeezed Ali's hand back.

Ali wasn't just trying to reassure Frankie, but also herself, too. This had been one hell of a year, and it wasn't over yet. She hoped life would stop throwing them all curveballs for awhile, she had enough to deal with.

And once again Ali thought of Maglor, and wondered if that was part of why he visited the sea so much. Not just because of the Silmaril he'd thrown into the waves, but if the very waves themselves, endlessly rolling, marked the passage of time, the distance between his life now and the life that had been destroyed so long ago.

And I helped destroy it. Ali raised her free arm and looked at her hand. She remembered the battle madness of her dreams, coming out of the frenzy covered in blood and thinking *what have I done*.

And yet, none of that justified the torment they'd all been through eons later. Ali's life hadn't been so bad, especially when contrasted with Sören's, but collectively, there had been more suffering in the family now than what they'd caused others back then. It burned Ali's blood that her family was considered the villains of *The Silmarillion*, and the Valar to be just and wise and perfect. *All gods are petty tyrants, that's why they're gods.* The two that had left their world in a trail of broken hearts were the latest examples of that.

"You're going to be OK, Frankie," Ali said, steel in her voice. "We won't let the bastards win."

But she wondered if even fighting them was a fruitless effort. They couldn't even recover the Silmarils, back then, never mind overturn the Doom. And they hadn't been as frail, as fragile, as they were now in mortal bodies.

But we're angrier. That has to count for something.

–

When Ali and Frankie and the kids got back to the mansion, Sören and Kenny had both returned; Sören was helping Kenny put groceries away. Ali let Frankie visit with Sören, and supervised the kids doing their homework before dinner.

After dinner, Maglor took the kids for their piano lesson, and Ali lay down for a nap. When she woke up Kenny was laying next to her, not sleeping himself, just holding her and watching her. Ali kissed the tip of her nose, and Kenny tweaked one of her locks.

"Hey," Kenny said.

"Hey." Ali smiled and looked at the time. She yawned and stretched. "How's it going?"

"It goes." Kenny nodded.

"Did you have a good bike ride?"

"I did, till I got a flat."

"Oh, shit."

Kenny nodded again, frowning. "It happened close enough to home that it wasn't the worst pain in the ass to push the bike and everything on it, but still." Then Kenny chuckled. "Sören wants to get me a Vespa scooter for my birthday."

"Oh god, that's coming up... soonish." It was May thirteenth; Kenny's birthday was on June fifteenth. Ali had barely thought about it with everything else going on, and felt a bit sheepish.

"Not so soon, but soon enough. The big four-oh."

It was hard to believe Kenny was going to be forty this year, he still looked like he was in his twenties, and he often acted like an overgrown kid. "Soon enough that we should start planning. Did you want to go to Cali to see your family -"

"No, not really," Kenny said. "I mean, don't get me wrong, I don't mind seeing my family, but I also try to minimize how often I go to the States. Just makes me too sad."

"Yeh, I bet." Ali was once again glad that she'd grown up in Australia. It had problems, but not like America did. "You should give me some hints as to what you want, though."

Kenny shrugged. "Surprise me."

"Oh, fuck's sake." Ali playfully elbowed him. "Come on, there must be something..."

"A lapdance from you, then."

Ali laughed and gave him a little shove. "Pervert." Then she leered. "You can get that anyway."

"True, but... I dunno, Ali. I have pretty much everything I want." Then their eyes met, and Ali knew "pretty much" meant "not completely".

"So if it's pretty much, then what's missing? Hm?" Ali cocked her head to one side.

Kenny took a deep breath, and Ali sensed he was a little nervous. But Kenny came out with it. "I've just been thinking... well..."

"Well?"

"The kids are six now, they're gonna be seven in December. Sometimes I think it would be nice if they had, you know, a little brother or sister. I mean sure, they've already sort of got that with Sören's kids, but it's... not quite the same."

Ali nodded. And then she felt a little wistful twinge, remembering the way Frankie's baby kicked her. Being pregnant with twins had been difficult, and having newborn twins moreso, but there was also a certain magic to it, and the idea of Metallica and Megadeth having a little brother or sister put a smile on her face.

"I'm not trying to put pressure on you," Kenny said quickly. "It's not a dealbreaker for me if we don't have more kids. It's your body, your choice -"

Ali quickly shut him up with a kiss. "I like the idea. I do want to think about it a little more, but... we could try for another baby." Megadeth and Metallica hadn't been planned, though Ali didn't like to think of them as an "accident", her children brought indescribable joy to her life, even with the stresses of parenting. But if they were going to have another child, this one needed to be planned.

"You sure?"

"Like I said, I want to think about it a little more, like at least another week or two, but..." Ali gave him a hug. "I'm leaning towards yes."

Kenny laughed and hugged her tight.

Then Ali sighed, remembering her visit with Frankie earlier. Before she could stop herself, she heard herself saying, "I just hope that if we have another baby, Frankie doesn't feel like she can't ask us for help with hers, like she thinks we have enough on our plate."

"Oh, is she freaking out about the impending arrival?"

Ali nodded. "Especially with, you know, Flóki having left her like that."

Kenny's nostrils flared and his brow furrowed. "Yeah. Fucker."

"I feel really bad for her. Being pregnant would be stressful enough on its own, never mind losing one of her partners like that, and now it looks like her relationship with Margrét may not survive the loss..."

"That's rough." Kenny frowned. "I hope they can work things out."

"I do too." Ali sighed. "Poor girl."

Kenny nodded. "She deserves better than this. Although, she's better off without that Flóki guy. If he had *that* much of a problem that he just wanted to take off and leave, he should have tried to talk to her about it. People need to be honest with each other in relationships. And not just for their own sake, but it would set a bad example for the kid, too, to know their parents hadn't talked about things."

"Yeh, I agree."

Their eyes met, and Ali knew then Kenny was about to call her out on something. She braced herself. "Ali, I felt that little... tingle... when you brought up Frankie. You like her, don't you?"

Ali facepalmed, but she just nodded before she took her hand away from her face. "I do. But..."

"If you both want to go there and Margrét and Sören don't have a problem with it, I don't have a problem with it."

"OK, *but.*" Ali was a little relieved Kenny felt that way, but now she needed to explain why she wasn't about to run right out and ask her on a date. "I feel like... even when everyone's OK with an arrangement, it seems like taking on a new partner is a big deal, and any sort of change, even positive, could further destabilize her relationship with Margrét. And I feel like she's too raw from what happened with Flóki. Like I'd be taking advantage of her when she's vulnerable. And if she said yes, I'd wonder if she was just saying yes because she wasn't thinking clearly from grief and was using me as a sort of... pain relief... and she might say no to try to push me away. So now really isn't the right time for that. I appreciate that you're open-minded about opening up our relationship, but I don't know if going there with her is the best idea, not for awhile, and maybe not ever."

"Fair," Kenny said. "But that's not the only person you have your eye on, either."

"Oh god." Ali realized she couldn't exactly hide that sort of thing from him, across their Force bond, and Kenny had probably kept it to himself till now to be polite and not embarrass her further, since she was embarrassed enough with how she was reacting. "I can't, Kenny."

"Why the hell not?" Kenny gave her a confused look. "The situation isn't the same with Maglor as it is with Frankie."

"No. It's even more complicated." Ali folded her arms and huffed. She wanted to run and hide, but she knew Kenny would just drag her out and make her talk about it... and she'd do the same if the situation was reversed. That was part of why their relationship worked so well for as long as it did.

"I don't get it."

"I don't understand what there is to get. Just because we were... a thing... back then, doesn't obligate us to be together now. Nobody owes anybody sex, nobody owes anybody a relationship. I'm still Maedhros, but I'm also... me, Ali. I would want him to love me for who I am now, not just who and what I was to him back then, and -"

"And what makes you think he doesn't, or wouldn't?"

"For starters, he had his son taken away from him. It seems really sleazy for me to be like 'oh hey, sorry you're sad about your son, and that it was done by someone you had feelings for, want to fuck?'"

Kenny snickered, and then clapped his hand over his mouth, eyes wide, looking ashamed of himself. "Sorry," he said through his hand, and then took it away. "I'm not trying to make light of all of this. Just the way you put it -"

"Nah, it's OK." Ali shook her head and chuckled too, realizing that sounded terrible. Then she looked down, feeling herself scowl. "I just feel like now is a really bad time, all across the board. Not the least of which being..." Ali looked up at the ceiling. "Sören told me that Maglor left, once upon a time. Back in... 2014. Because he got sick, and Maglor realized Sören could die, and he didn't want to go through that again... but he made up a bullshit story about why he was leaving, this was before Sören knew he was an Elf."

"I don't know how Sören could see those ears and think Maglor was completely human, especially with having an astrophysicist brother who specializes in speculating on aliens and alternate universes."

"This is Sören we're talking about. The same guy where, every time Anthony Hewlett-fucking-Johnson is over here the two of them are making eyes at each other and they won't just fuck already. Sören is brilliant, but he's also a fucking idiot." She had a vague glimmer of memory from when she was Maedhros, how Fëanor could invent things but was also absent-minded, frequently forgetting where he put things, sometimes confusing his own sons' names. *"You! ...Finwë!"* And Fëanor seemed to be oblivious to the fact that his own son, Maglor, had a crush on him, where Maglor had to throw himself at him once he was of age... Ali smiled fondly. *The more things change, the more they stay the same.*

"Right, Dad would agree, never mind." Ali knew Kenny was referring to Fingolfin. "But what you're saying is... you're afraid Maglor will leave if you get involved with him?"

Ali nodded solemnly. "It's one thing for him to be involved with Sören and Nicolae. They're immortal. I'm not. I don't want to get involved with him and have him take off once that sits in. There's already a chance Frankie and Margrét's relationship is done because of Flóki. I don't want Sören and Nicolae's relationship to..." She couldn't even finish the sentence. The part of her that was Maedhros was remembering how close Fëanor and Fingolfin had been, how fiercely they had loved each other through all their ups and downs... and how at the end, Fëanor was convinced Fingolfin hated him. She didn't want Sören to go through that a second time. "And I don't want Sören to hate me, to blame me for destroying..."

"He wouldn't," Kenny said. "He'd know it wasn't your fault, he wouldn't take it out on you, he's not like that."

"Still. He's been through enough. I don't -"

"Do you know for a fact that Maglor is going to just... bail... again? I mean, isn't that something you could talk to him about?"

Ali shrugged. "I'd feel like I was beating him up for something he did when I wasn't even here. I'm sure he feels bad enough about it."

"Which is probably why he wouldn't leave again -"

"I... don't want to take that chance. The stability of this family means I *can't* take that chance." Ali rubbed her face, feeling very tired again even though she'd just taken a nap. "Please, Kenny, I know you mean well -"

"I do. I want you to be happy... and I want him to be happy, too. I mean, this is gonna sound stupid, but I don't think it's the wrong timing for you to tell him how you feel at all. It feels like the right time. Like something he needs. Something got taken away... but he gets something back, too."

"Well, you and I will have to agree to disagree on that." Ali frowned and patted him. "I don't want to risk it, Kenny. So please drop it."

"Fine. I'll drop it for now. But I don't think you should just... shove your feelings under the rug forever. I think even before the year is over, you should tell him. If nothing else, you owe it to him to be honest. And it's not like he can't tell, I don't think."

Ali realized Kenny was probably right in that respect - she wondered how much Maglor could pick up in the Force... what he could hear in the Song. If her Song had turned to something schmoopy and romantic. The thought tickled her and horrified her all at once. "I'll tell him... when I tell him. In the meantime..." Ali flomped back on the bed. "Enough serious shit for now."

"Yeah, I'm sorry. Let's relax." Kenny smiled. "You want to soak in the hot tub for a bit?"

"Sure." Ali sat up. It still felt surreal to her, after growing up on a sheep farm in the outback, here she was living in a mansion that used to be owned by one of the Bee Gees, and she was about to go sit in a hot tub. Of course all that glittered was not gold - Ali didn't envy the way her cousin's life had been uprooted, and this was more of a gilded cage.

But Ali didn't want to think about it too much. She didn't want to think at all. She followed Kenny down the hall, and upstairs. It was time to take a little vacation from her problems, and everyone else's.

Chapter 17

It was the morning of Monday, May twenty-fourth. Sören had a busy day ahead of him, and had to wake up earlier than usual - even after a couple cups of coffee he still wasn't feeling fully awake a couple hours later. The first order of business for the day was an installment, and Sören had convinced Ali to wait outside with him as he watched for the truck. Kate and Tori lay in the grass and Sören tossed a ball to Huan, who brought it back for it to be tossed out again.

Before the truck even showed up, Huan began to bark, tail wagging. "What is it?" Sören asked. "Is it the lorry?" Huan barked and ran over to Sören, looking happy and excited.

Sören bundled Kate and Tori into the baby sling, secure just as the truck pulled in. The driver got out, with two assistants. "Mr. Kierkegaard?" the driver asked.

Sören blinked, and then once again remembered "Stefan Kierkegaard" was the alias he was using with the public. It felt so strange still to be using a different name for safety's sake, and even stranger to be addressed by a surname. Sören nodded and the driver handed Sören a pen and a clipboard to sign off on some things.

The driver and assistants began moving boxes out from the back of the truck into the meditation room. Most of the boxes were flat, and Sören and Ali watched as they were open, revealing mirrors, and the driver and assistants began to set the mirrors up all along the walls of the meditation room. Sören had gotten permission from Dooku ahead of time, explaining that he wanted to start using the meditation room for his workout program; he'd finally chosen a fitness regimen.

Sören watched as the longest box was opened, and out came components for a semi-permanent, portable pole that would run floor to ceiling. Ali's eyebrows went up when she realized what it was. "Is that what I think it is?"

"If you're thinking it's a pole, yes, that's what you think it is."

Ali cocked her head to one side with a small smirk. "You're taking up pole dancing?"

"Well, I have to do *something* to build up strength and endurance for Krav. Pole dancing isn't just for strippers, you know! Not that there's anything wrong with stripping, either, but... have you ever seen pole dancing? It's very athletic. It works out the entire body. And it looks like fun. So..." Sören shrugged.

The driver and assistants started to put the pole together, even though Sören could have done it himself, or with help from someone in the family like Maglor. "I'm not judging," Ali said. "It's just..." Ali snorted. "A very you thing to do, I guess. Anthony says take up some sort of exercise program... you decide on pole dancing."

"It's art," Sören said. He grinned. "Sexy art."

Ali facepalmed, snickering. Then Ali asked, "Does Anthony know?"

"Not yet." Sören knew that he was eventually going to have to tell Anthony what he'd chosen for a form of exercise, but he was hoping to put off that conversation for awhile - even just thinking about telling him sent heat into Sören's cheeks, a tight flutter in his stomach. He didn't know if Anthony would think that was too corny, like Sören was trying

to be Magic Mike but was more like the Full Monty instead... or if, conversely, Anthony found the idea hot... and Sören was really trying not to open that can of worms with him.

Regardless, Sören would be seeing Anthony soon - very soon. Sören started to feel that giddy rush that he got just before Anthony came by. They didn't have Krav today - that would be Wednesday - but they had two orders of business to take care of, and Anthony was picking him up. Just before the pole installation was complete, Sören's cell phone went off with a simple text from Anthony. *I'm in the carport.*

Sören couldn't resist, firing back *Hi In The Carport.*

Anthony sent back a poop emoji and a knife emoji. Sören grinned at it, finding that response strangely charming.

"OK, Anthony's here," Sören said. "I gotta go. I honestly thought they'd get done first, but -"

"I can take it from here," Ali said.

There was now the ordeal of getting the baby sling transferred to Ali. Sören kissed the girls goodbye and tousled their hair. "You sure you don't mind watching them while I'm out?" Sören frowned, worried once again that Ali would feel like he was taking advantage and treating her like a source of free child care.

Ali shook her head. "If I minded I wouldn't have offered, idiot."

"OK. I should be home by three, maybe four at the latest." Sören gave Ali a hug and waved on his way out.

Anthony was sitting in his Audi A7. He was dressed business casual - a charcoal grey blazer with black trousers and a light grey shirt; there was his usual expensive genuine Rolex watch on his right wrist. His short black hair was perfect as always, and he smelled delicious. Sören tried to not think that he looked delicious, too. Since Anthony was bribing Sören with taking him out to a brunch at a classy place before the shooting range, Sören had attempted to dress up as well, wearing a burgundy button-down shirt and black trousers. He hated wearing ties but he'd brought one, black to match his pants, and now he pulled it out of his pocket and attempted to put it on in the car. Anthony gave him a look.

"What?" Sören gave Anthony a look back.

"You're doing it wrong. Here, let me..." Anthony reached out and began to fix Sören's tie. Just the proximity and little bit of touching involved sent a frisson down Sören's spine, hair on his neck and arms raising... nipples hardening, cock starting to rise, heat and chills tingling through him. Sören's mouth went dry, and looking into those beautiful green eyes didn't help. Sören *wanted*, every nerve in his body screaming to grab Anthony Hewlett-Johnson and kiss him until they were breathless...

...and he didn't. The tie was done; Sören flipped down one of the mirrors for his approval and then nodded. "*Takk*," Sören said to Anthony. He gave a nervous chuckle. "I fucking hate these things."

"Well, you clean up nicely." Anthony quickly looked away and focused his attention on pulling out of the carport. "You look sharp."

Sören had a mental image of the old Rankin/Bass *Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer* movie, which he'd seen for the first time during his first Christmas with Maglor in 2009, what felt like ages ago now - the scene with Rudolph flying into the air calling out *She thinks I'm cuuuuuute!* Sören felt like an idiot for wanting to jump and dance around at the compliment from Anthony, his face on fire again. Sören swallowed hard and couldn't even thank him.

Once they were out of the carport, before they got on the road, Anthony used the Force to pass over a cup from Starbucks. Sören smiled. "*Takk,*" Sören said again.

"Thought you could use the caffeine."

"Jæja, you know I'm not a morning person."

"No, and it's always harder on days when you have to do things you don't want to."

"Yeah." Sören exhaled sharply.

"You'll do fine." Anthony glanced over and their eyes met and held for a moment before Anthony looked back at the road.

"Thanks for the vote of confidence." Sören gave a nervous little laugh. "I'm not so sure."

Anthony smirked. "Hi Not So Sure."

Sören stuck his tongue out at Anthony - immediately feeling like an idiot, like an overgrown child, worried that Anthony would think even worse - and to his surprise and delight Anthony stuck his tongue out right back. Sören laughed harder, and felt a little better.

Anthony reached over and gave him a reassuring little pat, his touch once again sending heat and electricity through Sören; Sören's nipples ached, wanting attention, and the thought of Anthony's tongue on them...

Stop that. Sören sipped his coffee.

—

After brunch, Anthony took them to an indoor shooting range in Sydney. At the front desk Anthony confirmed their reservation and they had to fill out some paperwork; Sören was under his alias and once again felt that nervous risk-of-exposure feeling every time he was in a situation where he had to use the name Stefan Kierkegaard. But everything was fine, and next they had to sit through a ten-minute video on gun safety, which was mandatory for Sören's first visit to the range, and then they were led to a supply room. They were both renting revolvers for an hour - though Sören knew Anthony carried a gun on his person - and in addition to selecting the revolvers, Anthony choosing the Smith & Wesson 357 for both of them, they were both required to put on earmuffs and protective glasses. Sören had to put his hair up into a bun to keep it out of the way of the earmuffs... and he took a look at himself in the mirror and made a face, thinking he looked completely ridiculous with the earmuffs and protective glasses.

"Why do I need these?" Sören asked, having to speak a little louder than usual to hear himself.

"The sound the gun makes when it goes off can potentially damage your ears," Anthony said. "You don't want to end up with hearing loss, or a little high-pitched noise ringing all the time. And the particles from the bullet... you don't want that going in your eyes."

Sören made another face; no, he didn't. Looking stupid for an hour was preferable to that. He also felt stupid for even asking, like that should have already been obvious, that gunfire would blast tiny particles, and would make an explosive sound not dissimilar to how a plane created a sonic boom taking off. Sören's cheeks flushed - he knew he shouldn't even care about what he looked like here at the shooting range, he wasn't here to impress others... but of course, there was Anthony. And somehow Anthony managed to not look completely stupid in the earmuffs and glasses. If anything Sören thought he looked weirdly sexy. Sören bit his lower lip, not wanting to admire Anthony like that, especially not now when he had to get in the right frame of mind and getting all flustered over Anthony wasn't going to help him calm his nerves.

The shooting range had instructors, for those who wanted to work with an instructor, but Anthony was going to teach Sören himself. They weren't completely alone - the range was supervised by two men in protective gear - but there was still nonetheless a feeling of intimacy as the lesson began. Anthony demonstrated with his own rented pistol how to hold the gun, how to stand holding the gun, and then he put Sören's pistol in his hands. "You try."

He helped guide Sören's hands to hold the gun properly, and then made the stance beside Sören for him to imitate. Sören did. Then Anthony gently pushed the gun down and had Sören repeat it, this time without Anthony guiding him. After a few drills, Anthony deemed Sören was ready for the next step.

The next step was, of course, shooting the gun. There was a control pad, and Anthony selected an option that popped up a single target, a human silhouette with points marked on the chest and head. Sören swallowed hard at the sight of it - even though he knew it was just a target and not a real person, the idea that this training was going to teach him to shoot someone in the heart or the head sent a sick feeling through him. Sören forced himself to look at the cold reality of the situation, and that he could be saving his own life, or his children's, or one of his partners, with this knowledge. Whoever took Dag was probably still out there. He knew he had to get over it already.

Anthony went first. He once again got into position. "There's no safety on this model," Anthony said, "you just fire." He gestured for Sören to watch, and Sören did indeed watch as Anthony's finger pulled the trigger. There was a bright muzzle flash and Anthony's body jolted with the recoil; Sören's nose twitched at the acrid smell of burnt gunpowder. Anthony had hit the target's chest. Sören wondered how many times Anthony had made that same shot in real life, on an actual person, and decided he didn't want to know.

Anthony turned to Sören. "Your gun can hold five rounds."

"You mean bullets?"

Anthony nodded. "So now you're going to shoot the target's head, and then I'll bring up our next targets before we reload."

The thought that Sören was not just going to fire the gun once, but five times, and probably more than that, intensified that sick feeling. A chill went through him. Anthony scowled, seeming to sense Sören's reservation. Sören nodded and steeled himself. "All right," Sören said.

Sören and Anthony switched places. Sören got into position and took a few deep breaths. His head spun, and he managed to block out all of the fear and distaste. *Just do it. Get it done.* Nothing else existed, just looking down the sight of the gun, aiming for the target's head, right where it was marked. He slowly exhaled and pulled the trigger.

The muzzle flashed as the revolver bucked in his arms; Sören watched the bullet make a perfect shot at the target's head, a hole where the marker had been. The acrid smell of gunpowder intensified, and between that and the fight-or-flight rush, dizzy, heart pounding, Sören felt like he was going to vomit. The urge passed, and Anthony was reaching out to him now, giving him reassuring pats with his free hand.

"Good job," Anthony said.

The target went down; Anthony went back over to the control pad and now two targets flipped up, both human silhouettes, heads and chests marked. Anthony and Sören looked at each other and nodded, then Anthony got back into position and fired off rounds into the head and chest of the target on the left, then the target on the right. He was a quick shot, and Sören wondered how he could do that, remembering the way the recoil felt - Sören's hands and arms were still throbbing.

All too soon, it was Sören's turn again. Anthony brought up two more human silhouettes. The fight-or-flight feeling was back, and Sören's hands shook a little as he got back into position. "Easy," Anthony said. Sören took some more deep breaths, and then he pulled the trigger, aiming at the head of the target on the left. After the bounce and the flash, he squeezed again and popped a bullet at its chest. Then he moved to the right and shot again. And again.

If Sören hadn't been out of ammo, he still would have had to stop. His breath came out in little gasps and he was shaking from head to toe, his heart hammering violently in his chest. The room felt like it was rocking back and forth. But then Anthony grinned at him and said, "Good job," and Sören couldn't help smiling back, dazzled by that grin. And then something else happened - Sören looked at the holes he'd put in the targets, realizing he'd done that... and he thought of Justin Roberts, how powerless he'd felt when Justin hit him, insulted him... the time Justin had threatened him with a gun, before another rape. Sören thought of Justin Roberts shot and bleeding, and Sören just nodded, feeling a grim sort of satisfaction.

The fight-or-flight panic was replaced by a giddy feeling... a rush of power. Sören looked at the holes in the targets and felt like he'd taken back at least a little control of his life. It was good feeling in charge. The thought of blasting away at whoever had taken Dag, in time...

Get a hold of yourself there. Sören swallowed hard, realizing he *liked* this, he got the same sort of thrill he'd had the time he and Ari went bungee jumping when they were in their early twenties. The same sort of adrenaline rush he'd had when he was an intern at a hospital, handling emergencies, saving lives.

He got angry with himself for feeling this way, remembering the smug smile Justin had when he'd played with his gun... the same smug smile Einar had playing with his. Sören knew that of course not all gun users were bad - he liked Anthony, too much really, and he knew Anthony didn't just carry a gun but had killed with one; he felt he could trust Anthony Hewlett-Johnson with his life, even though they had only known each other a matter of months and there were still things about himself and the unusual set of circumstances he was in, that he hadn't told Anthony. But he thought of Justin, and Einar,

and school shooters in the States, and other Americans who'd gone on mass shooting sprees at places like movie theaters and churches, and he felt sick again. He didn't want to be one of those people.

And yet, he knew now that he was a killer. He had, in fact, killed before, and he hadn't even used a gun to do it - he thought of Force choking Einar to death before Einar could rape and kill his sister. Sören knew he was capable of doing it again, under the right circumstances.

The gun had unleashed something in him, and Sören wasn't sure if it could be put back on the leash. That thought terrified him even more than first holding the gun had.

"OK, now we're going to reload," Anthony said.

There were boxes of ammo waiting on a table off to the side. Sören watched Anthony load his revolver, and then Anthony took out the ammo and did it again, this time Sören doing as he did. Then Anthony took the ammo out of Sören's revolver and had Sören reload again, without watching and imitating. Sören managed to reload the revolver, and they went back over to the control pad. Five human silhouettes came up, all marked at the head.

Sören swallowed hard, and watched Anthony get into position. Anthony walked sideways, shooting at the targets as he walked, one after the other in succession. Not much time to recover from the recoil and the shock of the blast, just bam-bam-bam. When the targets were all shot, Anthony lowered his gun and looked at Sören, and hit the control pad to bring up five new targets.

Sören took a deep breath. He was shaking a little again. He took another few slow, deep breaths, and then he got into that cold, unthinking space again, just doing, not thinking or feeling. Lining up the gun with the targets, walking sideways as he pumped off five rounds. Then he came back to himself, letting out a shuddery gasp as he saw that he'd made five headshots, he'd done it.

"Very, very good," Anthony said. "One more round and then we'll be done for the day."

"Then what?"

"I think I should bring you to the range once a week. We'll keep getting you comfortable and familiar with the gun, and eventually, when I think you're ready, we'll do reloading on a timer, and shooting at moving targets."

So there was no escaping this; this was Sören's life now. Sören understood Anthony thought it was necessary, but it was still unnerving. Just a year ago, he wouldn't have foreseen himself doing anything like this. But then, one world had literally ended, and its effects had rippled across worlds. There was no going back to "normal" anymore.

Anthony brought up five more targets, all marked at the chest. "This is all you," he said, stepping back.

Sören walked sideways again, taking shots at each marker, still feeling the gun buck in his hands, arms and hands throbbing, but again he was in that numb, empty place and then he came back to that mixture of anxiety and thrill. Anthony took the gun from him and then removed Sören's eyewear and earmuffs, before his own. He took Sören's trembling hands, and there was that surge of arousal again, but Anthony's touch was also comforting and Sören stopped shaking soon enough.

"You're a natural," Anthony said.

That was exactly what Sören didn't want to hear, but he just nodded. *"Takk."*

They brought their revolvers and protective gear back out to the supply room, signed out, and then they were on their way. Sören rolled the window down, needing to feel the breeze, letting himself zone out as he watched Sydney roll by. After a few moments of silence Anthony finally asked, "You OK?"

Sören nodded. He decided to ask then, "When you first learned to use a gun..."

"How did I feel?" Anthony gave a wry smile. "Sick. But also kind of..." Anthony made a vague hand gesture before putting his other hand back on the wheel. "There's a certain sort of adrenaline rush that's hard to explain. A lot of people in high-risk jobs - paramedics, police, firefighters, military - we're all wired like that."

"Shit." Sören scowled.

"You feel it too, don't you?" Their eyes met.

Sören just nodded. He looked back out the window, feeling like Anthony had just seen into his soul, and he suddenly felt vulnerable, even though he'd just learned how to shoot a human-like figure in the head.

"I have something for you," Anthony said.

Your cock? Sören immediately kicked himself internally for thinking like that, not wanting to want Anthony like this, not wanting the complication. Of course, it wasn't Anthony's cock. When they got to the mansion, Anthony took it out of the glove compartment - it was a Smith & Wesson .357 much like the one he'd used at the shooting range, and a few boxes of ammo. There was also an envelope with registration papers, all under Sören's assumed identity, Stefan Kierkegaard.

"There's instructions on how to clean the gun in the envelope, too." Their eyes met again. "I'm still going to take you for practice once a week, but since you do know how to shoot a gun now... I'd feel better if you had this, just in case. Hopefully you won't need it."

Sören looked at the gun, and back over at Anthony. He knew that obviously it made no sense for Anthony to teach him shooting lessons to learn to protect himself unless he had a gun himself, but it still felt surreal... and it made him nervous.

"If you're worried about your cousin's kids, or your own," Anthony said, seeming to sense one of his fears immediately, "keep it in a safe place, where they can't get to it. I might also want to speak to Ali myself about her kids having some gun safety education, maybe learning how to shoot themselves. The sooner a child is taught to respect a gun, that it's not a toy, the better."

"You don't think they're too young -"

"No," Anthony said. "Anyway, when we have our next Krav practice, I'll want to have a word with Ali."

Sören nodded. He didn't know how Ali and Kenny were going to react, especially Kenny, coming from the States where gun culture had caused a lot of problems. He hoped this

wouldn't drive a wedge in the family. But he knew Anthony was right - if there was going to be a gun in the house, the kids needed to learn safety. And he knew this wasn't the only gun in the house; Maglor had at least one, and knew how to use it.

"Thank you," Sören said. It felt like a weird thing to be thanking him for, but Anthony was taking time and trouble to try to help him.

"You're welcome." Anthony patted him, and Sören once again resisted the urge to grab Anthony and kiss him hard, his body screaming for more of Anthony's touch. "I'll see you on Wednesday."

Sören felt very, very tired as he got in. It had been a long day, longer still for the adrenaline crash that he was feeling now, the shooting practice done and over with. There was a safe behind one of Sören's paintings on display in the hall - a painting of an aurora in the shape of a phoenix - and Sören moved the painting and opened the safe, then Sören put the gun in the safe. He knew that wasn't an ideal place for it, if he was in a situation where he needed access to the gun fast, like an intruder, and he was going to have to come up with a storage solution where it was out of reach of children but also still accessible in a time of need.

Sören thanked Ali for watching the girls; she seemed to sense that he was not in a mood to talk about how his day had been - not yet, anyway - and then changed the girls, fed them, and just held them and rocked them for awhile, fussing over them. Even though they weren't his biologically, they were still *his*, he thought of them as his daughters; he would never cease marveling over the little wonder of their existence, melting each time he looked into their eyes and they smiled at him. He knew he would die for them, sacrificing himself if he needed to, and today he knew he would kill for them, as well. He longed for a world where he wouldn't have to worry so much about protecting them, but until that day came... he knew part of taking care of them was defending them, if necessary.

After cuddling the girls, making them sleepy - calming himself down as well - he put them down for a nap, and then he lay down himself, still in his "business casual" attire, tie and all. The cats got on the bed with him, and Huan, and as Sören took turns petting the cats and dog, his mind replayed the shooting range. He had enemies out there that, of course, a gun couldn't kill. But there was also the very real threat of their Force sensitivity being discovered, or their relation to Dag being discovered - he wondered why no one had come sniffing around Ali yet, of course, it probably helped that MI6 had agents watching - and them being attacked or abducted, whether by the same people who had taken Dag, or someone else who might hate and fear them for what they were, or, just as bad in a different way, want to force them to use their powers for evil. Sören wondered if Dag was being forced to do things like remote viewing or telepathic suggestion, and the thought chilled him. He hadn't been able to sense his brother's presence out there anywhere since Dag had been taken, and that bothered him too.

Yes, he had to make sure that didn't happen to anyone else in his family, or himself.

Sören closed his eyes. He felt exhausted, and he needed some rest. Laying there thinking about upsetting things would just keep him awake, so he thought of better things - his mind conjured up the beauty of Iceland, someplace he was still homesick for, and happy memories there, like when he took Dooku to the Nature Baths at Mývatn and they kissed under the Northern Lights. He thought of them making love for the first time in the cabin in Svalbarðseyri. He thought of how good it felt to be in Dooku's arms, snuggled into the shield wall of his chest, rubbing his nose in the silver pelt, how safe he felt. Then his thoughts turned to Anthony, and what it would be like to be held by him, to kiss him, to

make love...

It was a dangerous thought, but comforting nonetheless. Sören couldn't help smiling as he drifted off to sleep.

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He is out walking, pushing the girls in their stroller. It is a beautiful day. He is in the park by Sydney Harbour where he and Anthony were accosted by two neonazis a couple of weeks ago. The two neonazis are back, and then they transform, one into Justin Roberts, one into Einar.

"You're supposed to be dead," Sören says.

"Don't you know, you dumb cunt? Nothing is ever ended," Justin says, and sneers before he pulls a gun on Sören.

Sören manages to use the Force to rip the gun away from Justin, and as he points it at Justin, Einar is running off with the babies. Suddenly Frankie shows up, and gets in Einar's way. Sören watches as Frankie attacks Einar the same way she attacked Justin Roberts years ago...

...and then Frankie goes up in flames, screaming. The babies are watching, helpless, screaming too. Sören tries to reach out, but he can't stop it and she burns up and up and up...

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The next day, Sören was in a foul mood. He'd woken up from his nightmare screaming, in a cold sweat, and he hadn't been able to sleep last night, afraid of having the same dream. Even though he knew logically it was just a dream, and his subconscious was regurgitating everything - contrasting Sören using a gun, with the two abusers he'd had who were familiar with guns, and Sören's fear of losing Frankie, since she hadn't accepted the immortality-giving blood when it was still available - the dreams had still felt unnervingly real, and it shook Sören to his core.

Sören went along with Frankie to her second prenatal exam that month, which he'd already planned on, and kept glancing at her to prove to himself that she was here and was OK and his dream had just been a dream. But eventually Frankie noticed he was staring just a little too much, and on the way back to the mansion she asked, "You OK?"

"No," Sören said honestly.

She didn't bring it up again until they were back at the mansion, and Sören had put the girls down for a nap and it was just the two of them, Ali and Kenny giving them some space. Frankie reached out to Sören on the couch, just holding him, and after a few minutes of stroking his curls and rocking him a little, she asked, "So what's wrong?"

Sören sighed. He gave her a little kiss and set up. "I had gun practice yesterday. Anthony took me to a shooting range."

"Is that what you're calling it now?"

Sören facepalmed and snorted, and laughed a little too hard - he needed it. He was uncomfortable discussing his attraction to Anthony with her or anyone, he was uncomfortable even acknowledging it to himself, but nonetheless, Sören relished Frankie's sass. It was the sort of thing he would have said himself if their situations were reversed.

"I mean actual gun practice, Frankie." Sören gave her a mock stern look. "Shooting real guns."

"So... you can use a gun now?"

Sören nodded. "I'm not an expert at it. I'm going to have to keep practicing. But yes, I pulled a trigger and put holes in targets."

"And something about that is upsetting you."

"All of this is upsetting me. The gun practice isn't so much a cause as it's a symptom. You know, when Maglor came back, and settled down with me and Nico, I honestly thought things were finally gonna be OK. We had real, actual peace for awhile. And then... it all came crashing down. Even as we've been in Sydney for almost six months and it feels like things are sort of getting back to normal... they're not, really. They're never going to be normal. I'm never going to feel completely *safe.* The fact that it's considered *necessary* to learn how to use a gun to defend myself, defend my family... What kind of fucked up life is this? I took a nap yesterday and I had a nightmare -" Sören's voice trailed off, not wanting to upset Frankie by telling her the details.

Frankie put her arms around him again. Sören started to cry, and felt ashamed of himself - not because he believed boys and men shouldn't cry, but because he felt he needed to be strong for Frankie, with her being pregnant, and with everything she herself had gone through lately. He knew she was having a hard time too, if not harder, and he didn't want to make this all about him. But Frankie resumed petting him, and then she took his chin, lifting his face towards hers, and started kissing his tears. After raining kisses over his face, their mouths met, and they both moaned into the kiss as their tongues played, teased, quickening that spark between them. They kissed again and again, hungry, a frenzy coming over them like they were trying to stop the flood of grief with the fire of passion... to both lose themselves in pleasure and forget everything else.

Sören began to kiss and lick Frankie's neck and throat, knowing how much she liked that. Her nipples were hard through her T-shirt, and Sören's hand strayed to rub one. She was more sensitive now that she was pregnant, and she bucked against him, rubbing urgently against his thigh. After another deep, needy kiss, they looked into each other's eyes, and then Frankie pushed Sören up, got off the couch, grabbed his hand and tugged him by the arm in the direction of the bedroom.

As soon as they got in the bedroom, they started undressing. Frankie was naked first, and Sören paused to admire her, all curves, the ink of flowers and vines over her body making her look like an ancient fertility goddess. When Sören got his last article of clothing off - his underwear - Frankie shoved him onto the bed and climbed on top of him, making Sören laugh. He stopped laughing as she leaned down to kiss him hard, and his hands roamed over her soft skin, savoring the feel of her. Her breasts rubbed against his chest, their nipples rubbing together, and they both groaned at that, both the sensation of their sensitive nipples playing together, and the debauched sight of their swollen nipples rubbing, teasing.

Sören started kissing Frankie's neck again, and then his lips latched around a nipple, drawing it into his mouth. He was rewarded with the lightly sweet taste of her milk, and he moaned around her nipple, sucking harder. Frankie stroked his hair again, giving him a knowing smile. "Like that?" she purred.

"Mmmmmf." Sören nodded, and took a few licks at her dripping nipple before he suckled again. He moaned as she started to rub against him, feeling her slick folds and clit brushing his cock. He turned to lap and suckle the other nipple, drinking more of her milk, and she continued to rub herself on his cock; he enjoyed the sound of her breathing harder, moaning.

They kissed again, and Frankie tasted her milk on his tongue. Their tongues took a few playful licks before they kissed some more, harder this time, and then Frankie's breast was back in Sören's mouth and she was grinding on one of his thighs, playing with his cock.

Sören was taking his time with her body, enjoying himself - wanting her to enjoy it. He thought about how soon she'd be sitting on his face, and the thought of eating her was usually enough to bring him close to orgasm without being touched. But suddenly the fantasy of his tongue on her clit, and the present enjoyment of her nipple in his mouth, was interrupted by the memory of the nightmare he'd had yesterday afternoon. In his mind's eye he once again saw Frankie engulfed in flames, heard her scream, felt the powerlessness as he held a gun in his hand and still couldn't defend her against whatever evil it was that had come for her.

Despite Frankie's hand stroking it, Sören's cock went soft. Sören tried desperately to push the nightmare out of his head, to refocus on Frankie's body, but the thought kept hammering in his skull: *I am immortal, Frankie is mortal, and sooner or later she is going to die, and with how many gods we've pissed off just by existing that's probably going to be sooner. My love is the kiss of death, I fuck everyone's life up who gets close to me.*

It became clear Sören's cock wasn't hardening back up, and Frankie stopped stroking him, took her breast out of his mouth, and frowned.

"I'm sorry," Sören said. "It's not you, it's -"

"Are you sure about that?"

And then Sören realized that of all the worst times for him to not be able to get it up, now was especially bad, with the insecurities Frankie was having about herself since Flóki left. Frankie looked down at her pregnant belly, and back up.

"Oh my god, Frankie, it's not that. I mean, I was hard for you just a minute ago." Sören reached up to stroke her face, her hair, look into her pretty grey-blue eyes. Once again he felt that intense, volcano-exploding anger at how Flóki had treated Frankie by just walking out; even if it had nothing to do with her pregnancy body, and probable post-pregnancy figure, the fact that him leaving was causing so much insecurity just filled Sören with hatred. His hand brushed down and began to affectionately rub her tummy. "It's not you, *elskan.* I swear it's not your body, I think you're beautiful..."*And I wish you could see it, too.* Sören didn't mind giving her reassurances, but he also wished Frankie could feel more confident in herself. He knew, too, that was easier said than done, with the way society was.

"So what is it?"

Sören hadn't wanted to upset her by telling her, but now he felt like he had no choice - it was either this or make something up that she'd know was bullshit, and then she'd wonder if it really was her pregnant body again. "I had a nightmare about losing you." Just speaking those words made Sören feel vulnerable, like admitting to the fear was giving the Powers That Be even more power over him and his family.

"Oh." Frankie's face got sadder, but Sören sensed that she believed him and it was compassion and concern for him. "Oh, honey." She kissed his brow. "I'm not going anywhere -"

"Not intentionally. But..." Sören blinked back tears, not wanting to cry again. "I worry about... our enemies..."

"We'll give them hell." Frankie sneered.

Sören laughed without humor. "They're gods, Frankie. Or at least most of them. Some of them aren't gods, but they've still got some kind of power, enough to make us unpersons, or -" But of course, whatever Sören had seen in his dream had been godlike. Or demonic.

"Shhhhh." Frankie gave him a little kiss. "It was just a dream. I know you worry a lot, you've been a right mother hen throughout my pregnancy, and it's understandable why. Your own mother died, not pregnant, but still..."

"And then Miriel." Sören let out a shuddery sigh. He realized that something about Miriel giving birth to the Spirit of Fire was etched in his soul, and of course he was going to worry about anyone he gave his seed to. Though Frankie was not Nerdanel, Sören had a vague recollection of fretting over Nerdanel too, having a full panic attack every time she gave birth.

Frankie took his hands, kissed them, and put them on her heart. "It's going to be fine, Sören. You'll see."

Sören didn't want to argue with her, that no amount of *it's OK, it'll be OK* reassurances actually worked right now, when he was waiting for the other shoe to drop. He simply pulled her into his chest, his lips and nose in her hair, his arms tight around her.

The feeling of them holding each other skin-to-skin was comforting, enough that after a little while Sören's mind stopped replaying the Frankie-burning-to-death scene of his nightmare over and over again, and simply *was*, resting in the peace of feeling Frankie's body against his, the coziness of their love for each other. Then Sören felt Frankie's arm moving, and when he heard her breath hitch, he murmured, "Hm??

"Oh, sorry. I'm... ah. I'm still horny, and pretty wet, I hope you don't mind if I take care of myself -"

Sören couldn't resist. "Hi Still Horny And Pretty Wet -"

Frankie gave him a playful smack with her free hand, shaking with silent laughter. "You cunt."

Then Sören got serious. "Can I watch?" He wanted to take care of her too, still wanted to eat her even if he couldn't get aroused with his current mental state, but first he wanted to watch her touch herself, which he'd found to be beautiful, delicious eye candy.

Frankie bit her lip, her cheeks flushing pink, and then she nodded, smiling as she got into position, laying on her back in front of Sören, legs spread, giving him a good view, and her fingers began to work in circles. She got back into it, breathing harder, giving little moans, and there was the soft sucking sound of her wetness; Sören licked his lips at the sight of the thick cream dripping from her, almost like his cum.

Sören patted his shoulders and held out his arms, an invitation. "I still want to get you off."

Frankie rushed right over, laughing. He helped her sit on his shoulders and guided her hips as he lowered herself over his face. He began to lap and suck at her folds, teasing, and then his tongue brushed around and around her clit, teasing even more. Frankie made high-pitched whimpers and deep growls of frustrated need - it was hard to believe the wildly different noises came out of the same person - and at last Sören's tongue worked its magic, licking away at the hard little nub, Frankie's voice rising as she began to roll her hips, fucking herself on his tongue. Soon he was sucking on her clit, knowing how much she liked that, and Frankie reached up and pinched her own nipples, played with them, moaning harder, continuing to rock against his face.

Sören's cock woke back up, and he took one of her hands away from her breast - a bit reluctantly, he was enjoying the show - and put it back on his cock. *This is what you do to me,* he spoke into her mind.

Frankie grabbed Sören's head, pulling on his curls, and started to buck faster, as he sucked harder, making slurping noises, savoring the taste of her, and the sight and sound of her passion. He stroked his cock as he sucked away, and when he started licking at her again he brought his precum-slick fingers to her mouth, watching her suck on them. His cock jolted, wanting to be in her. He resumed sucking on her clit again, kissing it, shaking his head and growling into her, and a moment later she climaxed. He loved watching her contractions, the cream gushing. He lapped at it, making her moan, and he licked her into a second orgasm, sucking her clit again into a third.

After her third orgasm they kissed, and then Frankie slid down, straddling his hips. He guided the tip of his cock and she sank down. She was so hot and wet, and Sören groaned as the sweet silk of her wrapped around him. He let Frankie guide the rhythm, riding him slowly to tease both of them. But then when she leaned down to let him suckle her nipples again, and he began to play with her clit, she started to ride harder, faster. Soon she was grabbing onto him for dear life, the bed rocking against the wall, their flesh slapping together, the wet slurping sound of his cock gliding in and out of her almost as loud as Frankie's cries and Sören's moans. Sören pawed at her, feeling her quiver beneath his touch, feeling across their bond that she was *right there*. Their eyes met, and Sören rasped, "I want you."

"Oh god..."

"I want you to come for me. You are so fucking hot when you come, want you to come before I come so *fucking* hard deep inside you..."

Frankie gasped, and then she let out a shriek as she climaxed, pulsing against his hand and around his cock. The way she squeezed around him, and the look of satisfaction on her face, the noise she made, set off Sören's own orgasm and he gave a hoarse shout of "*elskan*" as he lost control, the pleasure thundering through him, exploding into her, still throbbing around him. Frankie collapsed into his arms, trembling, panting... a look of awe and joy on her face. They kissed, and nuzzled, laughing together.

"There," Frankie said. "Better?"

Sören nodded. He still felt that worried prickly feeling in the back of his mind, but it was fading with that content, relaxed feeling post-orgasm. He hadn't lost Frankie yet; she was right here, in his arms. For now, that was all that mattered.

Chapter 18

"Again."

Anthony lunged forward at Sören, hand reaching out for Sören's throat to choke him. Sören raised his arm straight up, and rotated his body, trapping Anthony's arm in the rotation. Then Sören attacked back, elbowing Anthony in the head, practicing the groin kick Anthony had taught him. Anthony groaned, grateful he was wearing a cup. The cup blunted the impact, but only just so. Anthony knew that kick would be lethal in a situation where an attacker was unshielded - which was exactly the point.

They pulled apart, and Anthony nodded his satisfaction, catching his breath. Sören took a few deep breaths, trying to calm himself down enough to wait for Anthony's further instruction, but Anthony could sense empathically that Sören was still in "the zone", and even without that ability, it was easy to see in Sören's body language - as soon as they pulled apart, Sören went right back to fighting stance, instead of neutral stance - and there was fire in his brown eyes, a surly, predatory look on Sören's face that sent a frisson down Anthony's spine.

You aren't just teaching him Krav because you want him to be able to protect himself, you think he looks hot as fuck. Admit it.

The hottest sex Anthony had ever had, was with other soldiers - not just in the Royal Navy, but some Americans and the occasional UN soldier. Anthony was a versatile top, but he didn't like "pillow princesses" who just lay there; he liked a bottom who worked for it, and he especially liked aggressive, rough sex. Seeing Sören learning Krav - seeing Sören as a natural at fighting, bringing out that killer instinct - Anthony had a feeling Sören was an animal in bed. More than once in the adrenaline rush of combat, Anthony had to stop himself from grabbing Sören and kissing him. First and foremost, he was a gentleman, not wanting to initiate anything without consent.

But also, Sören was his assignment. He kept telling himself that getting too attached, mixing business and pleasure, would only bring heartache for them both. Not to mention there was some really *weird shit* that Sören Sigurðsson and his family were mixed up in, where Anthony knew he'd only scratched the surface, and he knew that going deeper could potentially change his life as well, not necessarily for the better.

"Well?" Sören bared his teeth, looking a little angry in his impatience.

Anthony couldn't help chuckling - just a few short weeks ago Sören had been reluctant to even learn Krav, and now here it was June fourth, and Sören was pushing him to the next drill when Anthony was recovering from a kick in the balls. "Give me a minute, you."

Sören put his hand on his hip and began to tap his foot.

That was bratty - though Anthony was still amused by it - and Anthony didn't even give Sören the courtesy of saying "again" so Sören could ready himself. He just lunged, reaching for Sören's throat again. But that, too, was part of the point; in a situation where Sören would have to fend for his life, he would just have to act, no advance warning given. And Sören's combat reflexes were getting good enough that Sören managed to block his arm, and this time Sören delivered a blow to the gut before kicking Anthony in the balls again. Anthony almost fell over from the force of the kick. Sören was riled up, and it showed, this counterattack more vicious than the last.

"Good," Anthony said. "Now for something different. But first..." They caught their breath again, and Anthony let the throbbing through his body calm down some. Their eyes met, and Anthony could feel Sören's pride in that *"good"*. That made Anthony feel proud, in turn. He knew Sören had a very difficult life, and the circumstances that had brought him and his partners to Sydney had demoralized him, crushed his spirit, made him feel powerless. He wanted Sören to feel stronger. He was starting to feel like that was his duty even more than protecting him here in Sydney - Sören most of all needed protection from his own fears and doubts and self-loathing.

Anthony almost understood what it was like. He'd entered the military before 9/11, in honor of his late uncle, who had died a war hero in the first Gulf War, and his grandfather who had been in World War II. He'd believed that the military protected the English people. What Anthony went on to see in the Middle East shook the foundation of that belief, feeling like he was fighting a senseless war built on dishonesty and greed. He went from feeling like he had a sense of purpose and honor, to a gnawing hollow. Even his service in MI6 hadn't quite fixed that.

But now he *was* making a difference in someone's life, and it felt good.*Not as good as it would feel balls deep in that someone.* Anthony smacked himself internally for the thought. He was trying to get over this stupid infatuation he had with the Icelander, and failing harder and harder.

Falling harder and harder. Seeing Sören fight Krav didn't help... seeing Sören get all sweaty, hair messed up didn't help.

Fuck, I want you. Anthony tried to get himself under control, making himself focus on the next drill.

It was time to do something that Sören hadn't done yet in their Krav lessons. Anthony needed to demonstrate the technique to Sören so he got in the defensive position, and had Sören get behind him as the attacker. "You're going to bear hug me from behind, and I'm going to escape from it."

Of course, Sören being behind him sent Anthony's mind into the gutter again, wondering what it would be like to feel Sören inside him. Anthony made himself focus. "Grab me and press my arms against my sides," Anthony told him.

Sören did as he was told - Anthony felt a shiver through him, enjoying being manhandled by Sören even as this was not sexual at all - then Anthony put his defense technique in action. He dropped into a squat, which served to lower his center of gravity, and spread his feet apart. Anthony turned to the side, and using an open palm, struck Sören in the groin until Sören let go.

Sören was wearing a cup too, but Anthony knew from the way Sören was cringing and breathing a bit more raggedly that he'd felt some kind of impact. "Sorry," Anthony said, feeling self-conscious, even though it was necessary. "Now you're going to do the same to me."

"Just a minute," Sören said.

Anthony raised an eyebrow. Sören must have realized how that looked, to be so impatient a moment ago and now be the one to need a moment to recover, and he gave a nervous little laugh. Anthony looked around the room - there were mirrors all up and down the walls now, presumably so Sören could get a better look at what they were doing when

they practiced - but it was otherwise bare, except for the mats and the bench and the table. Anthony wondered what Sören was doing for his fitness regimen, but now wasn't the time to ask about that.

When Sören was ready, Anthony got behind him, and now Anthony's mind went in the gutter yet again, thinking about taking Sören from behind, teeth in his neck... *Fuck.* Anthony exhaled slowly, and grabbed Sören's arms. Sören ducked down as Anthony had demonstrated, took a wide stance, rotated his body, and his palm came smacking into Anthony's balls. Then Sören was punching and elbowing him until Anthony broke his grip. Anthony steadied himself before he could fall over. "Good," he said.

"Again?"

"One more."

They did it again, and then they both needed a break. They sat on the bench together and Anthony used the Force to push a water bottle at Sören. Sören shook his curls free, damp with sweat, and Anthony fought away the mental image of what Sören would look like naked, glistening from sweat, his hair wild and damp like it was now. *Jesus Christ, stop that.*

"You're doing really good," Anthony said honestly, before taking a swig of his water.

Sören nodded. "I have a good teacher." He finally smiled, his face lighting up, and he reached out to pat Anthony's knee, and Anthony felt that surge of lust through him, even as Sören's smile took his breath away. *God, you're beautiful,* Anthony thought, looking into those brown eyes, before he quickly looked away, face on fire.

"Well..." Anthony looked down at the floor, and then back at Sören. "I think you're ready to step it up a bit. Right now we're only doing two Krav lessons a week, but starting next week, I think we should start doing three Krav lessons a week. Monday, Wednesday, Friday."

"We're still only shooting once a week, já?"

Anthony nodded. "So that's four days a week you're stuck with me."

Sören opened his mouth as if he were going to say something in response, then closed his mouth as if he thought better of it. "They want me to pick two days a week to run the art class at the shelter in Sydney. So maybe whatever day we're not..."

"And then one of the Krav days, since shooting is still a bit intense for you."

"OK." Sören nodded. He leaned back. "Are we doing any more Krav today?"

Sören sounded almost hopeful, and that gave Anthony a feeling of hope, that Sören would, with time, master it and be able to hold his own in a worst case scenario. "Yeah," Anthony said, "we'll do a fury drill and call it a day."

They finished their water, and Anthony put on a helmet, put in a mouth guard, and grabbed the pad. For the next fifteen minutes Sören practiced punching and kicking, with Anthony moving the pad as Sören moved. Finally it was time to stop. Sören was sweatier now, and Sören sat back down on the bench, wincing. "Damn," Sören said. "I'm sore and I wasn't even the one getting beat up."

"You have better endurance than you did a few weeks ago," Anthony said, trying to be encouraging. "I assume you're doing an exercise program now?"

"Something like that," Sören said, nodding, staring at an empty space in the center of the room.

Anthony got the gist from Sören's answer that Sören didn't quite want to talk about what that fitness regimen was, and Anthony wasn't going to press him about it, not today. At some point he did want to know what Sören was doing, but for now, he knew that discussing fitness could be a sore spot for someone like Sören who wasn't an athlete, and he didn't want to sour the mood.

It was, indeed, a good mood. Anthony felt a little celebratory, that Sören had already come this far. Sören still had a lot to learn and put into practice, and to keep practicing, but Anthony had faith he would get there with time. "I'm proud of you," Anthony said.

Sören's face lit up again, and there was something about that exuberance - like an eager puppy dog - that went straight to Anthony's heart. Not thinking, just feeling, Anthony said, "I'd like to do something nice for you to celebrate how well you're doing."

"Awww, really?" Sören's cheeks turned slightly pink and he bit his lower lip. Anthony wanted to kiss him again, and stopped himself.

"Yeah. Do you want to get a bite to eat, or... or something? I'll treat you."*Jesus Christ, I sound like I'm asking him out on a date.*

"Well, I don't want to be too extravagant," Sören said.

"I'm hardly a pauper, Sören."

Sören gave him a look, and Anthony realized that was the wrong choice of word, coming out classist without him meaning to be. But then Sören said, "It's not that I'm worried you can't afford it, it's I feel guilty about you taking me to a nice restaurant or something when I've been hitting you in the balls all afternoon."

Anthony's laughter rang out. That was one of the things he found endearing about Sören, that blunt way of speaking. Then Anthony nodded; he knew he'd probably feel the same way if their situations were reversed. "Fair enough. But I'd like to do *something.*"

"Well..." Sören crinkled his nose and bit his lower lip. Anthony fought back a growl. He was once again pretty sure the attraction was mutual, that Sören felt the spark between them too, but for whatever reason Sören was holding back on his end as well. Their eyes met, and Sören said, "You want to get ice cream?"

Anthony tried to watch what he ate, though he had a weakness for cake. He didn't want to get into lecture mode with Sören about being on a high-protein, low-carb diet with Krav and whatever Sören was doing for exercise, and even if he did advise Sören that way, he knew it was OK to "cheat" on a diet sometimes. Besides, Sören had such a boyish exuberance in that moment that it was hard to resist. "We could do that."

"I need to shower first before I go anywhere," Sören said, making a face. "Probably by the time I'm done with my shower it'll be time for Ali or Kenny to pick up the kids from school. Um... maybe we could all go get ice cream together? I'm not asking you to pay for all of them, just... I'd feel bad about the kids knowing I got ice cream without them."

Anthony couldn't fault Sören for that, and it helped to make the excursion feel less like a date, since Anthony was trying to avoid going there with Sören, tempting as it was. As it was, thinking about Sören showering first...

"And you can talk to Ali and Kenny while I'm in the shower," Sören said, "about, you know. Gun education for their kids."

Anthony followed Sören into the house. Kenny was outside playing with Huan, and Ali was curled up on the couch reading, with Kate and Tori in a bassinette nearby. Sören waved and Ali looked up from her book. "Oh, hey," Ali said. Then she wrinkled her nose. "You stink."

"No shit," Sören said. "I'm gonna go take a shower. Um, Anthony wants to talk to you about something."

"Both of you," Anthony said, giving an apologetic little smile as he looked out towards the glass doors at Kenny throwing a ball to Huan.

"Oh. All... all right." Ali put her book down, and as Sören walked off, Ali put her fingers in her mouth and gave a sharp whistle. Sören yelled "*AAAAA*" and Ali called out to him, "Sorry, mate." Anthony's own ears were ringing, and he cringed, and Ali gave a nervous little laugh as Kenny came in, Huan bounding after him.

"What's going on?" Kenny asked.

Anthony sat down. He'd been sweating far less than Sören, but he felt a little self-conscious, like he needed a shower too, like it was unprofessional for him to be giving them "the talk" about guns as their friendly neighborhood MI6 agent when he was like this. Kenny sat down next to Ali and looked at him expectantly, waiting.

Anthony decided to just be straightforward about it. "I've been taking Sören for shooting lessons once a week. He knows how to fire a gun now, and I gave him one. While I assume he keeps it out of reach from your children, we would both feel better if your children were educated in gun safety."

"Hold up, there's a gun in the house?" Kenny scowled.

"I come from a country that's much more restrictive about gun ownership than yours," Anthony said. "I had to get over my personal distaste of using firearms when I joined the service. Quite frankly, you're in a war of your own, whether or not you see it that way. The people who took Dag are still out there. There are other people who could make your lives very interesting if they discovered your Force sensitivity. Using the Force to defend yourself in a public place is going to attract attention you don't want. You're not exactly in a situation where you can afford to turn up your nose at guns. And it would be safer if your children were taught to respect guns, that they're not a toy, get to see how they work."

"My da hunts in the outback and taught me to use a rifle when I was a kid," Ali said.

"Yeah, but that's different," Kenny said. "You were shooting, like, rabbits and stuff. Not people." Kenny frowned again. "I still don't like the idea."

"Do you like the idea of one of your children picking up a gun and accidentally shooting the other, or themselves?" Anthony folded his arms. "That's far less likely to happen if they have firearm education. Even if Sören *didn't* have a gun, your children could be playing at someone else's house and maybe the parents might own a gun, and..."

"OK, OK." Kenny sighed, pinched the bridge of his nose, closed his eyes, and nodded. Anthony could sense that Kenny was still uncomfortable with the idea - Kenny was broadcasting news reports of school shootings and mass shootings in the States, which clearly affected him emotionally even though he hadn't lived there in years. Then Anthony saw the brief mental images of a Korean family who owned a small grocery store in Los Angeles and saw a teenage Kenny working in the store, robbed at gunpoint. Anthony's jaw dropped, and he quickly composed himself, not wanting Kenny to know he'd seen that.

Ali patted him. "It's a bit of a sore subject," Ali explained to Anthony.

Kenny nodded. "Yeah."

Now Kenny was broadcasting the mental image of using the Force to knock the gun out of the perp's hand and Force throw him into a display of crisps, with crisps exploding everywhere, and the perp gave him a look of terror as he ran out; the mental image cut to Kenny alone in the store, staring at his shaking hands, afraid of his own power. Then it was gone, and Kenny's eyes locked with Anthony's. *I know you saw that,* Kenny spoke into his mind.

I'm sorry, Anthony replied - both for accidentally prying, and also for the trauma of that experience. Anthony imagined that was terrifying.

"So, what does this involve?" Kenny asked.

"There's a course specifically designed for children at the shooting range where I take Sören," Anthony said. "It goes over gun safety, and it teaches kids to shoot. Part of gun safety, in my opinion, is seeing just what a gun can actually do, so you know it's not a toy, it is in fact a weapon. You both would be invited to come along. Actually, I'd feel better if you learned to use a gun yourself..." Anthony looked over at Ali. "And you already know how to use one?"

"A rifle," Ali said. "I've never used a handgun. But it would probably be smart to try, considering what you said." Ali swallowed hard. "I try to not think about... Dag, and the implications of what happened to him... very often. I *can't*, if I don't want to be a total fucking wreck all the time."

"I don't blame you for that," Anthony said. "I have many sleepless nights with what I know about things going on in the world, things most civilians don't know, can't know." He had, until fairly recently, been able to occasionally escape from lying there awake all night by picking up some random guy from a bar, having a conquest. Lately he hadn't been able to do that - he was too hung up on Sören.

"But just because I try not to dwell on it, doesn't mean it's going away." Ali looked at Kenny and took his hand; Kenny squeezed and nodded. "So, yeh, we probably should do some family gun lessons."

"I still don't like it," Kenny said.

"No one's asking you to like it," Anthony said. "But we all have to do things we don't like to get by in life. I'll tell you what I told Sören - part of my job of protecting your family is making sure you can protect yourselves."

Kenny nodded. "Yeah."

"You want some tea?" Ali asked. "I feel like this conversation calls for tea."

"Tea would be lovely, thank you," Anthony said.

Ali made a pot of tea. Sören was freshly out of the shower when the tea was ready, in a Nine Inch Nails shirt and black cargo shorts, damp curls falling down to his shoulders. He sat down and had tea with them. "So are you guys gonna join us at the range?" Sören asked.

Ali and Kenny nodded. "Might as well," Ali said.

"We're doing Tuesdays," Anthony said. "I can schedule for a later time on Tuesdays if we're bringing the kids along."

Ali and Kenny looked at each other, and Kenny nodded. "OK." Kenny was frowning again, and Anthony felt like giving them both a hug, thinking of what he'd seen with Kenny getting held up at gunpoint when he was just a teenager, and knowing Ali was upset about the disappearance of the cousin she'd never gotten to meet.

"Are you joining us for ice cream?" Sören gave them a hopeful look.

"I hadn't gotten to that yet," Anthony said. "But yes, Sören and I are going out for ice cream. If you want to come along..."

"Yeh, we can pick the kids up at school and all get ice cream," Ali said. "We've got seven seats in the Land Rover if you want to ride along..."

Anthony would normally prefer going in his own Audi, but he felt like it would be a show of solidarity to ride along in Ali's Land Rover. When they finished their tea, Sören changed and fed the girls, then they all piled into the Land Rover, with Anthony watching fondly as Sören put the baby girls in their car seats. Their eyes met and Sören smiled at him, and Anthony's heart fluttered, hating how stupid he felt, like a schoolboy with a crush. There was something about seeing Sören in dad mode that tugged at his heart, though, and gave Anthony a brief instant of regret at not having children of his own.

Then there was a moment of wondering what it would be like for him and Sören to be gay dads, raising a child together. He could see it now in his mind's eye so vividly, a little girl with dark hair, riding piggyback on his shoulders, then Sören spinning her around as she squealed and laughed... *Rey.*

Anthony gasped as he came back to himself. There were daydreams and there were visions, and it felt like this was the latter, like he'd *seen* something, and it almost felt like the future except it wasn't - Anthony looked younger in the vision; it felt like he was seeing something elsewhere. It unnerved him, the hair on his neck and arms standing on end. He remembered that Sören's brother was a known proponent of parallel universes, but...

Even more than the thought that he might have had a vision of another universe where he and Sören were together and had a daughter, Anthony was unnerved that he was entertaining that thought at all. *For fuck's sake, you're not even an item. You need to stop with these bloody Mills and Boon fantasies about this man. He is your assignment.*

Kenny had his window down, a nice breeze blowing in. "Man, the weather is perfect today. Not too hot, not too cold," Kenny said. "Might be nice to go for a bike ride later."

"Would be even nicer if you had a Vespa," Sören said.

"Oh god, not that again." Kenny chuckled. "I already feel like you're doing too much for us, letting us live with you rent-free and all, never mind getting me a Vespa for my birthday..."

"Oh, your birthday's coming up?" Anthony asked.

Kenny nodded. "On the fifteenth. Eleven days away."

"He's gonna be forty," Ali said.

"Welcome to the club," Anthony said. "I turned forty-one in February."

"It's fucking surreal, isn't it?" Kenny chuckled. "My brain still thinks I'm twentysomething."

"We should do something un-grownup for your fortieth birthday," Sören said.

"I agree," Ali said. "Something more suited for kids than adults."

"So what, like, Chuck E Cheese?" Kenny snickered.

"What's wrong with Chuck E Cheese?" Sören asked. "You should totally have your birthday there."

"Oh my god..." Kenny shook his head. Then he glanced over his shoulder at Anthony. "My birthday falls on a Tuesday, which is the day you picked for the range."

"You can have your birthday off," Anthony said.

"That wasn't it," Kenny said, "although I'll take you up on that anyway. Do you want to come to my birthday party?"

Anthony tried not to get too overeager, especially if Sören was going to make Kenny have his birthday party at Chuck E Fucking Cheese, but the thought of being included as part of the family gave him a warm, fuzzy feeling, and made him ache at the same time. He nodded and then he used his words. "Yes, thank you."

"You should still let me get you a Vespa," Sören said. "I used to have one when I lived in London. Nico got it for my birthday. They're a lot of fun."

Anthony's eyebrows went up at that. He pictured Sören riding around on a Vespa scooter, and heat flooded his cheeks. Then Anthony found himself curious. "You don't still ride?"

"Well, no." Sören looked a little sheepish. "Nico and I broke up for a few months and I gave back the scooter - he didn't ask me to, but I didn't feel right -"

"That wasn't what I was asking," Anthony said. "I mean, you haven't got a new one since you came to Australia?"

"No," Sören said, and looked down. "I don't drive anymore."

Anthony knew Sören didn't drive, but now he realized Sören *did* drive and no longer did so. And though part of him felt like he shouldn't pry, he still couldn't help asking, "What happened?"

"So..." Sören exhaled sharply and looked up. He looked very faraway for a moment, before their eyes met. Anthony sensed pain, like a wound was being ripped open, but before Anthony could tell Sören he didn't need to tell him, Sören said, "Back in October I was driving my jeep on the Ring Road and I got into a bit of an accident."

"You? Got into an accident?" That seemed odd in and of itself - what he knew of Sören, he thought Sören was probably a careful driver, and what he knew of the Ring Road in Iceland, there wasn't a whole lot of traffic or things to crash into.

Then Anthony had a recollection, of when he had been in the MI6 building with Letitia in October 2020, and she had gotten a frantic, panicked phone call about a car accident... right after he'd taken a spill down the stairs and hurt his left ankle. Letitia had to manage both sending an emergency cleanup crew to the site of the accident, in Iceland, and get Anthony to the infirmary, not knowing if Anthony's ankle was sprained or broken. It was in fact just a sprain, but Anthony normally did not have accidents like that, and the sudden, freakish nature of it, and the vision as he tumbled down the stairs - a flash of white like a nuclear explosion - had shaken him to his core. As had the nightmares that followed, feeling himself die in that flash. He didn't just fall down the stairs, but he'd fallen into a deep depression, intensified by the hopelessness of the world news, enough that he'd had to move back in with his mother for awhile. He was doing better now, thanks to antidepressant medication and a change of scenery, but...

Sören nodded solemnly. "I lost control of the wheel. I..." Sören nervously rubbed his curls, then his beard, shifted uncomfortably in his seat. "I know this sounds completely fucking crazy, but I had a vision. It wasn't a nice one. Since then I've been too afraid to drive, worrying I might get into another accident."

Anthony had chills now. While he already knew the answer to this question, he had to ask it anyway. "That accident, it was... Friday, October ninth, 2020?"

"How did you know?" Sören asked, eyes wide. His mouth made an "o".

"Wait, wait, wait." Ali pulled over. Anthony's heart skipped a beat and then started hammering in his ears - he could feel gears spinning in Ali and Kenny's heads, like they were making some sort of connection. "I remember that date because I was sleeping and I had a bloody awful nightmare. Like, the worst one I've ever had, ever. I still remember it to this day. I dreamed that I was out with Kenny and the kids, and suddenly people just started dropping like dominoes, dying, the land turned to ash and then it was all blowing away, and then they died, and I died too."

"I had the same fucking nightmare," Kenny said.

Anthony swallowed hard. He felt like he was taking a risk by saying something, but he also felt like he was in the wrong if he didn't say something. "The reason I remember the date isn't just because I was walking with Letitia in the MI6 building when she got the call about the accident, it's because just before she got the call, I took a spill down the stairs. I had a vision, like... like a nuke going off. And then nightmares for days, weeks, afterwards." Anthony's skin crawled. He was glad the nightmares had stopped, mostly, but it had taken awhile.

"You know how the portals can be used to get from place to place around the world without having to drive, having to fly?" Sören asked. "And I told you *he* was using them to go back to where he comes from, or other places?"

Anthony nodded.

"I didn't mean other planets," Sören said. "I meant other universes. I found out that what we all felt back in October... another universe was destroyed. We were feeling ourselves die. Not just us, but Nico felt it too. Mag - er, Marcus."

"*Jesus.*" Ali buried her face in her hands.

Sören looked down and Anthony felt him broadcast *and it was my fault and I am so, so sorry.* Anthony wondered about that, and he thought that was probably too harsh, but then Sören looked up, blinking back tears, and Anthony saw Sören's mental image of Katla going off on the news, and he knew Sören was capable of... something.

And yet even so, he still loved him. Anthony fought the urge to take Sören into his arms and comfort him.

"The thing that shits me is... things got *really weird* for a few weeks after all of that," Ali said. "Weird weather. An increase in crime. An increase in crackpots saying the end of the world was happening. But I didn't see a lot of reports of people saying they were having nightmares like we did, visions like we did."

"No," Sören said. "But I think you know why. That world was very... different." Sören gave Anthony a shifty look, and then looked away.

Anthony's head was spinning and he really didn't want to revisit the horror of last October, but he was still very curious what Sören meant by that. But, the conversation was being dropped; now Ali was getting back on the road, as the time drew closer to when the kids were getting out of school and they didn't want to be late.

As Ali drove on towards the school, Anthony sat with his thoughts. It was curious indeed that more people hadn't been reporting those experiences, which undoubtedly they would have had if they were having them... which meant whichever universe this was that got destroyed, there was probably a smaller population, hence why more people here weren't feeling themselves die, because they didn't exist there. And yet, somehow, Sören, Ali, Kenny, Dooku, Maglor and himself *did*, and that felt fated somehow.

He thought of the vision he'd had just a short while ago - that he was sure was a vision, where he and Sören had a daughter together. Yet another universe, another world where they were connected.

How? Why?

Who are you, Sören Sigurðsson?

Chapter 19

Two days later, Sören was spending late Sunday morning on the pole. The reason why he'd gotten a removable, portable pole was so he could take it down before Krav lessons, and put it back up after the lesson - he wanted space in the room to move around freely, and not risk crashing into a pole. It was a pain to keep taking the pole down and putting it back up, though, and Sören didn't know if maybe he should just leave it in the room.

In the meantime, he had been working on the pole almost every day. Rather than take a class or pay a private instructor, both of which he was wary about - he had indeed become very wary of strangers since Dag's disappearance - he was learning from a series of videos. It wasn't quite as good as seeing it live and in-person, but so far Sören was getting the hang of it.

Sören started off each session holding onto the pole, walking around the pole in circles on tiptoes. After a dozen rounds, he gripped the pole with his right hand, and brought his right leg up to the pole, his foot flexed, his knee feeling like an anchor. Using both his hands he pulled himself up, putting his left leg behind his right leg. His knees gripped the pole. He moved his hands a foot up the pole and worked his abs to bring his knees up by another foot, keeping them bent. He went up another foot, and now he started to lean, holding onto the pole with his leg muscles. He went up, and up. When he first started out he was only able to get halfway up the pole before he felt dizzy, but now he was almost all the way up, and it felt good to be less afraid.

He held, stretching again, and then he released his legs, putting them in front of his body, moving his hips and legs to slide down to the ground. He took some deep breaths, used the Force to bring over a bottle of water, and then he put the water down and got to work on his second move.

This time he gripped the pole like a baseball bat, but with his hands a foot apart. He took a step with his right foot and brought his left leg around, feeling his body speed up. With the momentum, he let his arms take the entire weight of his body and then pushed off and jumped up, grabbing the pole with his knees. He started spinning down the pole, keeping his arms high so he could spin longer. When the spin was finished, he put his legs down and moved his hips back, standing again.

After doing the fireman spin, he practiced the back hook spin. He put his right hand towards the top of the pole and his left hand near his chest. He walked around the pole, turned to face the opposite direction, and swung his inside leg forward, then back, hooking his leg onto the pole at his knee. With the momentum, he began to spin around. He brought his outside leg up and bent it at the knee, feet together.

Sören did three repetitions - the pole climb, then the fireman spin, then the back hook spin - and at last it was time for the pole sit. Sören saved this for last because it hurt, and he was ready to call it a day when it was done. He climbed onto the pole and sat hands-free, using his hips and legs to support his weight. He could feel the burn in his hips and thighs and shins, and when he finally slid off the pole he was out of breath again. He knew that before he'd become immortal, he wouldn't be able to do this at all, having an asthma attack. No longer having asthma was one of the physiological changes of his immortality, though it hadn't cured everything - Sören still struggled with depression. But his asthma was gone, and even though he still had to build endurance, it was less challenging and painful than it would have been pre-immortality.

Before he could feel grateful to Ingwion for at least giving him that, he thought of what the world would be like in ten years... a hundred years... a thousand... five thousand. Wondering if his immortality would prove more of a curse than a blessing. The thought chilled him, thinking of the world news, and all the horror that had happened just within the last hundred years. He heard Maglor's voice in his head: *Of all the reasons to go back in time and alter history... he couldn't have killed Hitler? Or stopped Donald Trump from becoming President of the United States?*

Sören resisted the urge to punch or kick the pole. He was already hurt enough, not just sore muscles, but he had "pole burn" again. He was also sweating - he was surprised by how much he could sweat, working the pole.

He dragged himself off to take a shower, but as he showered he found himself still angry, still bitter, that he'd been given immortality on a world that increasingly looked hopeless. Sören knew Maglor had watched the rise and fall of many civilizations, and he knew it had taken its toll on Maglor. As had getting attached to people and watching them die. And even though Maglor wasn't alone anymore - he had Sören and Dooku - it would be just the three of them. With the gods gone, the blood gone, Sören knew someday he'd have to face the deaths of the people he loved. Frankie. Margrét. Ali. Kenny. His children.

Anthony. Sören swallowed hard and blinked back tears.

A shiver went down his spine. Yes, he did love Anthony. And he couldn't bear the thought of getting involved with Anthony and losing him. As angry and hurt as he'd been with Maglor for leaving, he sort of understood it now, that fear of watching someone die after a life together.

Anthony was coming for dinner that evening, along with Frankie, along with Margrét. Sören was looking forward to seeing them, but it also hurt, knowing they'd all be gone someday, while he still lived. It hurt even more now that Sören knew Anthony had felt himself die in the Dagorath, and Sören had to wonder who he was, how they were connected. Sören was afraid to poke at that further, not able to take more heartache right now. But sooner or later he was going to have to rip the bandage off the wound and get to the bottom of this.

Sören needed to get his mind off his troubles - after Katla, he was afraid of being upset too long. Sören changed, then gave the girls a bath, diapered and dressed them, fed them, and then he put them in their stroller and went for a walk, bringing Huan. He also brought his gun, even though he was just going around the neighborhood and it was safe and quiet out here - he had learned from what happened to Dag that he couldn't be too careful. Carrying the gun on his person made him feel nervous, even though he knew how to use it. Just the weight and shape of the gun was a reminder that his life would never be normal again, not that it ever was, but especially not now.

When he got back to the house, after he put the gun away, he read to the girls from an illustrated book of fairy tales and fables. The book was in English, and Sören felt a flare of resentment that he was using a Danish assumed identity, wishing he could teach the girls about their Icelandic background, maybe even teach them Icelandic. He knew that as they got older - and old enough to understand the difference about what was OK to share with the public and what had to be kept private with the family - it wasn't outside the realm of possibility that he could share that with them, but he also knew that there was an advantage to learning other languages at a young age. He had begun learning English formally at age six, and he already knew a little English before that thanks to episodes of *Sesame Street* airing on Icelandic television.

Reading to the kids in English made him feel sad, nostalgic for Iceland, and after while he had to stop reading, making himself finish the current story first - *Little Red Riding Hood*. He sat there, cuddling the babies, trying not to cry. He didn't want his kids to see him sad and depressed, knowing it would take a toll on their own mental health. Nonetheless, he ached.

That was one of the most insulting things about that final conversation with Ingwion - the insistence that Valinor was his home. The idea that somehow not being willing to give up this world was some sort of moral failing. Iceland sang in Sören's bones, his blood. He liked Australia, and he was determined to have the best life here that he could, but it would never be what Iceland was to him. Going back to Valinor, leaving Iceland behind for good... the very thought made Sören want to scream.

He started to cry again, and hated it. He put the girls down for a nap and then he himself curled up on the bed, snuggling with the three cats and Huan, trying not to cry, and failing. Ali and Kenny had taken their kids out for awhile, and eventually Sören heard the door open and felt the familiar presence in the Force; judging from the sound of the bags they had probably taken care of grocery shopping while they were out, something Dooku would appreciate.

"Hello? Sören?" Ali called.

"Down here," Sören yelled back.

Ali came down to show Sören a carton of mint chocolate chip ice cream - one of Sören's favorite flavors. Sören managed a weak smile.

"Oh no, what's the matter?" Ali looked at the ice cream carton, then at Sören. "You don't like it?"

"It's not that." Sören sat up, trying to pull himself together, and cried harder.

"Here, let me go put this away before it melts and I'll be right back."

Ali came back a couple of minutes later, sat on the edge of the bed, and pulled Sören into her arms. For a moment she just held him and let him cry, not saying anything, then she picked his head up and asked, "What's wrong?"

"I don't know that I would call it wrong." Sören exhaled sharply. "It's same shit, different day. Missing Iceland. Thinking about... the inevitable. It was bad enough for us to get ripped apart the first time. Going through it all over again..."

Ali nodded, her mouth tightening. "Even though some of us chose to reincarnate as human when it was time for rebirth... that doesn't mean everything about the way our lives have been, was a choice. The Valar saw our mortality as a weakness, and threw things at us to try to break us." Ali touched Sören's face. "You especially."

"If those tinpot dictators think I'm going to just crawl back to them now after this, they have another thing coming." Sören sneered. But anger could only replace the grief for so long. His eyes welled up again, jaw trembling. “But it's going to hurt, to lose you. It's going to hurt Maglor even more...” He gave Ali a pointed look.

Ali pulled back and gave him a withering look. "Oh god, not you too."

"What?" Sören shrugged. "You think he doesn't remember that he was intimate with one

of his brothers, just like I was intimate with mine? You think he doesn't know that you know?"

"Just because we were together back then, doesn't obligate us to be together now," Ali said. "I will not force myself on him -"

"I highly, highly doubt you'd be forcing anything," Sören said. "Look, Ali, Maglor is bi. He doesn't like labels, and yes, he leans a little more towards men, but -"

"It's not that," Ali said. "I didn't assume he was gay."

"OK. I'm just saying, though, I think the feelings aren't as one-sided as you fear."

"Even if they're not..." Ali swallowed hard and looked away. "I mean, I don't know if it's even a good idea. You've seen what's happening to Frankie and Margrét's relationship since that fuckstick left. I'm really afraid that if I get involved with him, and he ends up freaking out as I get older, get sick... what it'll do to you and Nicolae."

Sören knew that with his own history with Maglor being what it was, he couldn't give Ali an assurance that Maglor wouldn't leave again. But he also knew that his relationship with Dooku was more likely to survive something like that. Sören's decision to accept immortality had been just as much for Dooku as it had been for Maglor, if not moreso. Sören thought of Fëanor watching Fingolfin and Finarfin vaporized, and destroying an entire universe in his raging grief. As much as that horrified Sören, he knew that he'd accidentally set a volcano off when he'd gotten angry on Maglor's behalf. It would be even worse if something happened to Dooku.

"I wouldn't worry so much about that." Sören took her hand and squeezed it. "Seriously, as much as I appreciate your concern for my relationships... I don't want that to get in the way of you being happy with Maglor, if that's what you both want."

"And I appreciate that you're willing to share him, but..." Ali blinked. "How does Nicolae feel about it?"

"I'm also fine with it," came Dooku's voice from the door.

Sören and Ali both startled at that. Even though Sören knew by now that Dooku was talented at masking his touch in the Force to eavesdrop, he still wasn't used to it years later. Sören raised an eyebrow. "How long were you standing there?"

"Long enough," Dooku said.

You know, you and Maglor have so much in common sometimes it's like he's your *son.* In Sören's mind's eye, he had the faintest glimmer of a timeline where Fëanor was pregnant, Fingolfin putting his head on the belly and saying *our baby.* Then the vision was gone.

Dooku came in and sat on the other side of them. "Alinta," Dooku said, "Even if you and Macalaurë had not had a prior history, Macalaurë has been deprived of love and companionship for a very long time. He has us, now, but... he still needs more. And the fact is, as you know, you and he *do* have that history. I would not stand in your way of rekindling what you once had. I want both of you to be happy."

"Well, thanks," Ali said, patting him. She sighed, pinched the bridge of her nose, and buried her face in her hands for a moment, shaking her head before she looked back up. "I still feel like I'd be rocking the boat -"

"Change is scary, even when it's good change," Sören said. He looked at Dooku, who nodded, and then back at Ali. "Nico and I didn't start off in an open relationship. That came later. And it was a bit of a transition. I imagine that it'll take some getting used to, figuring out how to juggle partners..."

"That, but also, you know, one relationship is work, never mind two," Ali said. "Maglor's very sensitive, he always has been, but especially now after everything he's been through. I worry about accidentally hurting him -"

"I think you're both reasonable, mature adults who can communicate and work through it if it does happen," Dooku said. "But I think that if you keep avoiding all of this out of fear that you'd hurt him... it's going to end up hurting him anyway."

Sören nodded. One thing he admired about Dooku was his perspective, his wisdom. Ali was pretty good at giving advice herself, but now Ali needed some advice, and Dooku seemed the right person for the job. Dooku took her other hand and gave it a squeeze, and a polite little kiss, European-style. "It is understandable that you might want to take some time before you talk to him about your feelings, as you know, there is a lot to consider. That said, I don't think you should wait too long."

"How long would you suggest?" Ali asked.

Sören and Dooku looked at each other, and Sören gave Dooku a "go ahead" gesture; Dooku had once been a barrister and he knew about nuances of timing. Dooku took a moment to consider, stroking his beard, and then he said, "A few days, perhaps. Three, four days. But the longer this goes on..."

"OK." Ali sighed deeply. She fell back on the bed, scaring one of the cats, who meowed and jumped down even though he wasn't in the path of her body. Sören tweaked Rasputin's tail and he brushed up against Sören, purring, then hopped up on Sören and began to knead.

"What if he says no?" Ali asked then. "I worry about making it awkward for everyone."

"Then we cross the proverbial bridge when we come to it," Dooku said. "I highly doubt he'll say no."

"No. Maglor has been very guarded about his feelings lately, broadcasting what's going on with him, but that doesn't mean he's not into you," Sören said.

Ali nodded. She sat up and rubbed her face. "You want some help in the kitchen?"

"Extra hands are always welcome," Dooku said.

"I could get the place presentable for guests," Sören said. The living room and kitchen were clean enough, but it would still be something to take his mind off the feelings and not be a wreck again when Anthony and Frankie and Margrét arrived. "But first, a minute?" Sören looked at Dooku, desperately craving a hug.

Ali patted each of them on her way out, and then Sören threw his arms around Dooku. Dooku held him tight, giving him a squeeze, and proceeded to rain little kisses over Sören's face. At last their mouths met in a sweet, gentle kiss, and then a deeper, more sensual one, hinting at the promise of passion later.

"Hi Daddy," Sören husked when they pulled apart.

"Hello, sweetheart." Dooku stroked Sören's face.

"You're home early."

"I sensed you were upset."

Sören looked down, feeling guilty to disrupt Dooku's work at the restaurant - also feeling ashamed, like he was a crybaby. "Fuck, I'm sorry -"

Dooku took Sören's face in his hands and lifted it, making Sören look him in the eye. Dooku's dark chocolate eyes were filled with love, and always made Sören melt a little, even after close to four years together. "You needn't apologize, my heart. You are my first priority. Never forget that."

Dooku pulled Sören close and pet his curls, rocked him. Sören was soothed by the feel of Dooku's strong arms around him, the shield wall of his chest, the feel and sound of his heartbeat. A few minutes later they kissed again, and then rubbed noses, and Sören skritched Dooku's whiskers like he was a cat, making Dooku smile and chuckle before he kissed the tip of Sören's nose, then his brow.

"Thank you for being so understanding about Ali and Maglor," Sören said. *I just want my kids to be happy.* The thought felt surreal, and a bit ludicrous, since Ali was sort of like the mom he'd never had, and Maglor was eons old. Nonetheless, that was how the part of him that was still very much Fëanor thought about it.

"I do," Dooku said.

"And also for... you know. Not freaking out over... well..." Sören just came out and said it, rather than trying to dance around it. "The possibility of Maglor leaving again, if he freaks out over Ali aging."

"I will admit that I do wonder how he will take it. As you know, he was willing to resume a relationship with you, and begin one with me, before we were made immortal. But I also believe he knew that opportunity would be given to us. I am not sure if he has truly reconciled himself to loving humans who will age and someday die, or not. I only know that as much as I do love him..." Dooku stroked Sören's face, pet his curls. "I do truly mean what I say when I say that you are my first priority. To be sure, I do not want Macalaurë to abandon us. But if he does... I would not want to lose you again. I *shan't* lose you. My soul fought its way back to yours. I will not let that be for naught."

Sören nodded. He felt that way too, but it was a relief to hear Dooku say that. And yet, he also knew people could say things, and when those words were truly put to the test, the promises would fall apart. Maglor professing his undying love and leaving the first time around was proof of that. Nonetheless, Sören wasn't going to let Dooku - *my Fingolfin* - go without a fight.

"The Valar did indeed use our mortality as a weapon against us, even as some of us - like you and myself - chose this path. And we did indeed choose it knowing that underestimating us and our capabilities would be their downfall. The Doom is still upon us, and we have suffered much. But our love is stronger than the Doom." Dooku took Sören's hands and kissed them, pressed them to his heart. "I believe we will prevail, this time."

"I certainly fucking hope so." Sören took both his hands and held Dooku's face for a moment before letting go. "I don't know how much more my heart can take of all this shit." He thought of Dag, wherever he was. *If he's even still alive.*

"Come," Dooku said, standing up, taking Sören's hand and pulling him off the bed. "Our guests will be arriving soon. Let's get our mind off things for awhile."

Chapter 20

Since late Sunday night, Ali had been keeping her distance from Maglor, preparing herself to confess her feelings, and the gamechanger that would be for her life and everyone else's. So, as difficult as it was to stay away, except seeing him at mealtimes and sending Metallica and Megadeth off to him for piano lessons, Ali avoided him. She worried that he might think she was being rude, might misinterpret her standoffishness as a sort of rejection, but then she reminded herself that he probably knew more about people's mental states than anyone else in the house, attuned as he was to the Song; he just didn't talk about it except when he needed to.

But finally, on Wednesday night, Maglor kept looking at her across the table at dinner. Like he was observing... like he was waiting. Ali looked away the first few times and then finally she started meeting his gaze, holding it, as if quietly acknowledging *yes, we need to talk.* And after dinner, when Metallica and Megadeth went to him for piano lessons, their gaze locked again.

Ali decided to hang around in the living room while the kids had their lesson, reading a book, but as much as Ursula K. Le Guin's words usually captivated her, she couldn't concentrate, feeling that frisson of anticipation.

When the kids were done with their lesson, Maglor approached Ali and said softly, "I'm going to take Huan for a walk. Would you like to accompany me?"

It had rained earlier that day, and it was still overcast, with the smell of petrichor in the air. Maglor brought an umbrella, and as he carried it, Huan's leash in the other hand, Ali wondered how Maglor had dealt with the rain in ancient times, and had the thought of *I wonder if he invented an umbrella.* The thought made ridiculous laughter bubble out of her, not able to help herself. Maglor looked over his shoulder and simply raised an eyebrow.

Ali shared the mental image of what was making her laugh. Maglor chuckled too. Then he got serious. "No, because the rain doesn't bother me," he said. "Not because of this..." Maglor gestured in the direction of his ears, which were covered by the flood of his black hair, a way of referring to being Elven without having to speak it aloud when they were outside, though no one else was around. "I enjoy it. I find it peaceful. I brought the umbrella for you."

"OK, well... you can still share it if you want to. Otherwise you'll be a drowned rat if it starts up again."

Maglor smiled. "It's going to start up again."

"You know this? Or are you just guessing?"

As soon as the sentence came out of her mouth, Ali felt like an idiot. Of course he'd know it. The Force heightened Ali's awareness but it seemed even stronger with Elves, that they were more attuned to the subtle nuances in weather, in the life of the land around them.

But even though Ali already knew the answer, Maglor said, "I know." And then he gave her a pointed look, and Ali knew he wasn't just talking about the rain.

Ali opened her mouth, wanting to say something about that, and no sound came out. Ali

didn't even know where to begin, how to put her feelings into words, how to ask about how he felt, what he wanted to do with that information, if anything. There was too much. They kept walking in silence, and then Maglor paused. He looked up at the sky. "Right..." He stretched out his arms and exhaled, closing his eyes. "Now."

The rain came pouring down. The rain of earlier that day had been light, this was heavy. Ali threw her head back and laughed, delighted somehow at Maglor's ability to predict the rain down to the second. Then she grabbed the umbrella from him and quickly opened it, while Maglor stood in the downpour, getting drenched. Huan ran in circles, tongue lolling, tail wagging.

Ali took the leash and took Huan off to the side to do his business, while Maglor stood in the rain, looking deep in thought, or perhaps not thinking at all, just being. After Ali scooped Huan's poop into a bag, she came over and handed the bag to Maglor. "Here, don't say I never gave you anything," Ali said, then with her hand newly free she grabbed Maglor's hand, who was chuckling, and instinctively dragged him under the umbrella with her.

The touch of his hand, and his proximity, and the laughter - the lightness of the moment - sent electricity through her. Their eyes held again, and Ali thought about kissing him, desperately wanting to kiss him, but she held back, lost in those silver eyes. They were close enough so that Ali could feel Maglor's breath, and a shiver went down her spine, her nipples hardening and not from the cool rain. Maglor looked as if he were studying her, though there was that shield around his mind again, and she wondered what was behind it. What he was thinking, feeling. If the spark was just her.

But then his arm was around her waist and he was gently guiding her back in the direction of home. They continued to walk in silence, but Maglor's arm stayed around her waist for a few moments, then as they got closer to the mansion, Maglor took her hand and squeezed. Once again Ali felt a tingle, but something in her held back, letting them just get home, though she was reluctant to break the contact between them.

When they got inside, Kenny and Dooku were playing the board game Sorry! with Metallica and Megadeth. Ali smiled, and then stopped smiling as soon as Huan ran over to the group and promptly shook himself, getting Dooku all wet. The sour look on Dooku's face made Kenny shake with silent laughter - Ali's laughter was less silent - and then Huan got up on Dooku's shoulder and started licking his face, which made it somewhat worse. Dooku rolled his eyes but affectionately tousled the dog's fur.

"I'll get a towel," Kenny said, grinning, and then he looked at Maglor. "You need one too, sheesh."

Kenny got up and ran in the direction of the bathroom, and came back with two fluffy teal towels. Dooku used the Force to pull a towel away from Kenny, and Kenny tossed the other towel at Maglor, who caught with perfect reflexes. Ali watched Maglor towel off, though she thought he looked sexy all wet. Their eyes met again as Maglor toweled off, and Ali turned to begin walking in the direction of her and Kenny's bedroom, to get out of her damp clothes and into pajamas. Before she could get too far, a towel slapped her on the ass, and Ali looked over her shoulder and saw Maglor holding the towel with a mischievous grin on his face. She had a memory of Maglor doing the same thing to Maedhros, and heat rose in her cheeks as she continued on towards the bedroom.

Getting naked to change didn't help, as it just reminded her that she was horny. And instead of a T-shirt and pajama bottoms, this time she put on a lacy camisole, dark blue, a contrast with her lighter blue pajama pants, and looked at herself in the mirror. She felt a

little self-conscious about the display of vanity, and even more self-conscious as she opened up her box of perfume oil vials, something she hadn't touched in awhile, but liked to wear every so often as a treat to herself. Now she found herself putting on one of the perfumes that smelled more sexual on her, and her cheeks burned as she dabbed on the oil. *It's like you're trying to seduce him and he hasn't even said he likes you that way, yet.*

But her mind kept replaying that moment under the umbrella, where they stood close, eyes locked, and it felt as right as anything had. Ali swallowed hard and licked her lips, her mouth feeling suddenly dry.

Maglor disappeared off to his studio, and Ali joined Kenny, Dooku and the kids in the living room for a game of Sorry!, which she hadn't played in some time. It was amusing to her to see Dooku playing a board game, but also heartwarming to see the tenderness towards the children, in "grandpa" mode, and Ali realized also it was father-son time with Kenny. Ali imagined Dooku had to be feeling a lot of things, with the Fingolfin part of him reuniting with his son Fingon; Ali knew Fingolfin and Fingon had been very close - not the way Maglor and Fëanor had been, it was innocent, but they weren't just father and son, they had been *friends*, Fingolfin had been so proud of Fingon, and knowing they were reconnecting now went straight to Ali's heart. Maedhros had always liked both his uncles, though he saw more of Fingolfin, and seeing Dooku relaxed and slightly less formal as they played Sorry! was a reminder of that.

After the next game finished, Kenny looked at the clock, and then at Megadeth and Metallica. It was time for the kids to start winding down for bed. They got in their pajamas and brushed their teeth as Kenny put the game away. When the kids were ready, Ali and Kenny went down to their room and took turns reading *If You Give A Mouse A Cookie*, showing the kids the pictures. The kids had already heard this story a few dozen times now but they never got tired of it; it was one of their favorites. It had also been one of Ali's favorites when she was a small girl, and she wondered if her kids would grow up to read it to her grandkids.

If we all live that long. That was a morbid thought. But now she thought of Caranthir, and Angrod, and how Maedhros had survived both of them. There had been no love lost between Caranthir and Angrod in life, and Maedhros had not been particularly fond of Finarfin's children either, remembering how self-righteous and prudish they had been. And yet, the part of her that was Maedhros forgave them - there was no room this time around for the bloodline to be divided against itself, and indeed, Ali wondered that if the House of Finwë had been united long ago, if it would have come to the same end. She didn't know if Caranthir and Angrod had chosen to reincarnate as Mortal the way she had, or if it had been a punishment in their case, but she knew they were fated to get along this time, either way. They also seemed to know that somehow, snuggling against each other as the story went on. Her fists clenched, determined not to lose them. Not to lose any of them. The thought that their enemies were out there, and her children were quite probably in danger...

Kenny reached into her mind. *Babe, if I can hear all that, you don't want them to hear that just before bed, do you?*

God, I'm sorry. Ali felt a touch of guilt. She wondered what they*could* remember, at this age - even a little felt too much. *Tears unnumbered, indeed.* Ali took a deep breath and tried to dial back her anxiety, making herself focus on the cute little mouse and his bigger and bigger demands.

When the story was over, Kenny and Ali tucked in the kids, hugged and kissed their cheeks goodnight, and then outside the door of the kids' bedroom, in the glow of the

nightlight and the glow-in-the-dark stars, Kenny and Ali held each other, leaning on each other. Kenny tweaked one of Ali's locks, and Ali tousled Kenny's hair. Kenny kissed the tip of her nose, and then he smiled and patted her and said, "Sören asked if I wanted to play Super Mario after the kids went to bed, so that's where I'll be."

"OK." Ali grinned, finding it adorable, and the idea of Fëanor and Fingon playing Mario together made her chuckle.

"We'll probably be up late, since Sören doesn't have Krav or the range tomorrow. Well, he does have that art class, but that's in the late afternoon."

Ali nodded. Then it took a moment to sink in - Kenny was gently hinting at her to go spend some time with Maglor, and there was the implication that Ali could spend the night with Maglor if they wanted to. Ali raised an eyebrow, and Kenny nudged her and winked.

"You can do this," Kenny said.

"Oh god. What if I make everything weird?"

"Like everything's not weird already."

Ali snorted, gave him a playful shove, and he shoved her right back, before leaning in to steal a kiss, and then he walked off towards the living room; Ali crossed her fingers and Kenny crossed them back.

Ali took a few deep breaths and then she went up to the studio. She knocked gently, and a few seconds later Maglor opened the door. He gestured for her to come in.

Ali took a seat and looked around at the soundproofing on the walls, the recording equipment, and Maglor's assorted musical instruments - an acoustic guitar, a synthesizer... a huge, ancient harp. Then she looked at Maglor himself, wearing black jeans and a black T-shirt, his hair unglamoured, falling to his thighs, pointy ears peeking out of his hair. Her breath caught a little and her heart skipped a beat. *Focus.* Ali opened her mouth, and once again was overwhelmed by all the feelings, not knowing how to put it into words. "Hi," she said.

"Hi," Maglor said, leaning back in his chair.

"Hi."

"Hi."

"Hi."

"Hi."

"Hi."

"Hi." Maglor cocked his head to one side.

Ali exhaled. "So."

"So."

Ali chuckled and facepalmed, feeling like an idiot. "I can't words tonight."

"It's all right." Maglor smiled, then he looked around the studio. "I could use a bit of air, if you'd like to come with me."

Ali's mind went immediately into the gutter at *come with me*, her face on fire. *Jesus Christ, I'm as bad as Sören. Right down to that thought immediately being followed with "Hi As Bad As Sören."* Ali simply nodded. Then she wrinkled her nose, thinking of earlier. "Is it going to rain again?"

"No, not anytime soon."

As it turned out, Maglor's idea of "a bit of air" involved lugging his war harp outside. Ali snickered, though she understood why - Maglor had been in the habit of playing outside ages ago. And it was a beautiful night. The air smelled of petrichor and the waning moon was just a sliver in the sky; there were a few stars visible. Ali felt a touch of wistfulness, remembering how her parents' home in the outback was far enough away from civilization that the Milky Way was visible in the sky. The thought of taking Maglor there and seeing him play the harp under the stars... a shiver went down Ali's spine.

But even here, in the night, the sight of Maglor sitting down at his harp was breathtaking. Even doing scales to warm up, the way Ali could feel Maglor going into the Song, like he was stepping deeper and deeper into water, and becoming one with it... his features were a mix of serenity and passion, and his long, elegant fingers were poetry in motion.

Maglor started with the Noldolantë this time, which surprised Ali - the first time he'd played the Noldolantë for her, he'd played other things first. This time, though, he went right to it, and Ali's mind traveled with the notes of the harp, and Maglor's rich tenor singing in Quenya. Once again, Ali didn't know exactly what Maglor was singing yet her heart knew, her soul knew, as her mind's eye played visions to go along with his words.

Maglor had come up with a new verse the previous time he'd played for her; after all of the tragedy of his people, and his family in particular, he'd sung of reunion, of love. And now there was another new verse. He'd rekindled old passions with Fëanor and Fingolfin, reborn as Sören and Dooku. Now he was also singing of Maedhros, and reclaiming their life together.

Ali's hair stood on end, her stomach fluttering, heart soaring. She wanted to run over to him and hug him, but she felt like interrupting his song would be a sort of blasphemy. Indeed, the awe of his voice, his composition plucked out on the harp, left her motionless, breathless, wordless. And even when the song was over, and their eyes met, Ali found herself unable to speak, unable to move, like she was made of pure emotion.

Ali thought Maglor might stop there, since the Noldolantë was a long song, thought he might wait for her to react. But, seeming to sense she was overwhelmed, he began to pluck out another song. It took Ali a few seconds and then she recognized it - "Umbrella" by Rihanna had been all over the place in 2008. Before Ali could feel too old, realizing how many years had passed since that song came out, and how young she was when it came out - all of fifteen - Maglor sang as the harp's notes flowed like raindrops, and her attention was back on him, riveted.

You have my heart
And we'll never be worlds apart
Maybe in magazines
But you'll still be my star
Baby, 'cause in the dark

You can't see shiny cars
And that's when you need me there
With you I'll always share
Because

When the sun shines, we'll shine together
Told you I'd be here forever
Said I'll always be your friend
Took an oath I'mma stick it out 'til the end
Now that it's raining more than ever
Know that we'll still have each other
You can stand under my umbrella
You can stand under my umbrella

These fancy things, will never come in between
You're part of my entity, here for infinity
When the war has took its part
When the world has dealt its cards
If the hand is hard, together we'll mend your heart
Because

When the sun shines, we'll shine together
Told you I'd be here forever
Said I'll always be your friend
Took an oath I'mma stick it out 'til the end
Now that it's raining more than ever
Know that we'll still have each other
You can stand under my umbrella
You can stand under my umbrella

You can run into my arms
It's OK, don't be alarmed
Come here to me
There's no distance in between our love
So go on and let the rain pour
I'll be all you need and more
Because

When the sun shines, we'll shine together
Told you I'll be here forever
Said I'll always be your friend
Took an oath I'mma stick it out 'til the end
Now that it's raining more than ever
Know that we'll still have each other
You can stand under my umbrella
You can stand under my umbrella

It's raining, raining
Oh, baby, it's raining, raining
Baby, come here to me
Come here to me
It's raining, raining
Oh, baby, it's raining, raining
You can always come here to me
Come here to me

When Maglor was done, Ali felt herself smiling so hard it hurt, tears in her eyes. She couldn't believe Maglor had done a Rihanna song on the harp, but it also was perfect for the situation they were in now.

Maglor held out his arms.

Ali came over to give him a hug, and they held each other tight, rocking, savoring the embrace, the feeling of reconnection and renewal. As they pulled apart, their eyes met again, and then Maglor grabbed Ali, pulled her onto his lap, seized her face and kissed her hard.

Ali didn't have to wonder anymore how Maglor felt, as their tongues met for the first time. Ali moaned into the kiss, nipples hardening, feeling herself get moist as the kiss deepened, their tongues rubbing and swirling together slowly, sensually. Maglor lovingly stroked her face, and she put her hand on his. When the kiss broke, Maglor's hand strayed to play with one of her locks, and she let him - the gesture was tender, even reverent. Ali's own hand reached up to stroke Maglor's hair, enjoying the silky feel of it; she tucked hair behind a pointy ear and tweaked the tip.

"I love you," Ali said, looking into those eyes like silver flame.

"I know." Maglor leaned in and kissed her again.

The kiss was familiar - the part of her that was Maedhros remembered what it felt like, what it tasted like - and yet new and exciting. Ali kissed him back hungrily, wanting to take in every last detail of this experience, burning it into her mind forever. Just the kiss alone was like making love, the way their tongues teased, hinting at all the ways they could tease each other. Ali found herself running her hands over Maglor's body, feeling the sculpted, sleek muscles through his T-shirt, enjoying the strength and grace of him. But it wasn't enough. She wanted him naked, wanted to feel his skin, wanted to feel his body against hers. Now she initiated the third kiss, claiming his mouth, claiming *him*, her kin, her blood, her own, the kiss a promise that they belonged. Despite the Doom, they had found their way back to each other, and here they were.

"I love you too," Maglor said. He took Ali's hand and kissed it.

Ali's jaw trembled, tears burning her eyes. She didn't expect that to make her cry, but the joy and relief surged through and broke the dam. And yet, she also felt intensely vulnerable with that admission, afraid to have come this far and have it be for nothing.

"Don't leave," Ali blurted out.

Maglor blinked, and Ali could suddenly feel the shield around his mind crack, just a little, and felt the flood of guilt for having left Sören, years ago, and now, Ali's fear that he would leave again. Maglor pulled Ali close and held her tight, started rocking her. "I won't leave," he husked.

Ali looked up at him, wanting to believe him - she could feel the sincerity of his words, the weight of them, but she knew it was one thing to say it now and another to put it into practice years from now. "No?"

"No." Maglor closed his eyes, shuddered a little, and when he opened his eyes again, Ali could see he was trying not to cry himself. "Ali, when I started a relationship with Sören again, I knew he was going to be offered immortality. But I also knew that would be his

choice, and he would be within his rights to refuse. Because Sören would be putting himself in the same boat as me - traveling every one to two decades when it becomes apparent we're not aging, having to start a life all over again, having to be careful about acquaintances and attachments. That's not a life I would want to force on somebody else. It was one thing for Sören and Nicolae to agree to come with me for the duration of their mortal life spans, another thing to them to do this for centuries, even millennia. So I wasn't sure he would agree to become immortal or not, and by then I'd reconciled myself to the fact that I would be with him either way, because it hurt too much to be without him, and I couldn't live with myself if I broke his heart again. And the same goes for you as well." Maglor stroked Ali's face again, played with her locks. "I'm not going to leave. I won't lie, it won't be easy for me to watch..." He didn't have to say it; Ali just nodded. "But just leaving you... I can't do that anymore. It was hell enough to leave Sören."

"I plan on sticking around for a long time," Ali said. She felt a bit stupid after she said it, knowing even a hundred years wasn't a long time by Elven standards.

Nonetheless, Maglor smiled and kissed her forehead. "You're stuck with me for a long time." Maglor tweaked one of her locks. "And, you and I have a longer history, from back then, than I do with my own father."

"Yes. Although we have a shorter history, now, than you do with Sören."

"I loved him before I knew who he was - though he reminded me a great deal of my father, and it should have been more obvious to me. And I began to love you before I knew who you were, though I did suspect you were possibly someone from my past."

"You..." Ali blinked, barely able to believe what she was hearing. "You've loved me for awhile?"

Maglor nodded solemnly. "I love you as both Maedhros, and yourself. I fell in love with you all over again, just like I fell in love with Sören all over again, with Nicolae. The way you were, and what you've become, both the old and the new."

"And here I was wondering if you felt about me the same way. Great, now I feel like an idiot."

Maglor chuckled and gave her a little kiss. "I didn't want to say anything until the time was right. This has been... a year... so far, and I wanted to wait for the dust to settle a bit before -"

Ali snorted. "That's an understatement." Then she sighed. "I don't know if the dust is ever going to truly settle. It feels like one thing after another." Their eyes met, and she knew Maglor was thinking the same thing she was: *Sauron.* Wondering if he was out there, lying in wait for them. The Aesir were a problem, the Valar were a problem... and Sauron was a problem above and beyond either of them.

"Well, we have a moment of peace right now," Maglor said.

"I'd like a moment of passion."

They kissed deeply, fiercely. Maglor got up, picking up Ali as he rose, carrying her in his arms, kissing her as he made his way towards the glass doors. As delicious as the kiss was, Ali had a second of alarm, remembering how much it had been raining. She broke the kiss and said, "Maglor, your harp..."

Maglor laughed, and Ali watched as the harp rose from the ground and began floating, following them in through the glass doors. Ali laughed too, shaking with laughter - the sight of the war harp floating in the air was ridiculous, and she felt ridiculous for not realizing that Maglor could bring it in without touching it. Once the harp was inside, on the mat by the doors, Maglor gently put Ali down on the floor, closed the doors, and then picked up the harp and began carrying it inside. Ali followed him, and paused in front of her bedroom with Kenny as Maglor went on to put the war harp back in his studio. A few minutes later Maglor came back and stood with her outside the bedroom door, and they just looked at each other for a long moment before they grabbed each other and began kissing their way inside the bedroom.

Once inside the bedroom, Ali used the Force to close the door, and then they fell on each other, undressing each other feverishly. When they were naked, they spent a moment looking at each other. Maglor was just as gorgeous as Ali had remembered, fantasized about, muscular but lean, wiry, complexion flawless. He glowed softly, and his eyes were iridescent silver, like liquid labradorite. His body was hairless except for a thick dark bush, nesting a cock that was long, thick, and standing at attention for her. Ali reached out and ran her hands over his naked body, enjoying the soft skin and hard muscles, and the way he shivered at her touch.

Then he leaned in and his hands cupped her breasts, thumbs teasing the already-hard nipples, before his hands slid over the hourglass of her waist and hips, the thick thighs, reaching around to cup and rub her ass. Ali savored the feel of his touch, his caress - those sensitive, skilled hands, that could master instruments, that could master a lover's body - and the feel of the lust and admiration behind it, which Maglor wasn't shielding now, letting her see what he was seeing and feeling as he looked at her. "You're beautiful," Maglor said, eyes raking over her. "I can see why you took this form. It's a good look for you."

Ali smiled. She felt like a sex goddess, and yet shy and vulnerable all at once. "You're magnificent," Ali said, before she leaned in for a kiss.

They kissed and kissed, and then Maglor began to kiss and lick Ali's neck, an exquisitely sensitive place. When he kissed and nibbled the sweet spot where the neck and shoulder met, Ali shuddered and started walking towards the bed, dragging Maglor with her. Ali climbed on the bed and Maglor climbed over her, a determined, almost-predatory look on his face that sent a frisson through Ali, finding him incredibly sexy. At last Maglor was on top of her and her arms went around him as their mouths met again, and she started rubbing against him, feeling like a cat in heat.

That feeling intensified as he kissed his way down her neck, down to her breast, to draw a nipple into his mouth. Ali cried out, bucking against him. She moaned as his tongue lapped at the nipple, swirled around it and lashed the aching nub harder, faster, before suckling it again, harder this time. "Oh, fuck..."

Maglor groaned with Ali's nipple in his mouth, and Ali gasped with pleasure as she felt Maglor's hard cock rubbing against her thigh. She moaned again as Maglor turned to kiss and lick the other nipple, moaning louder as he suckled. She found herself cradling his head, feeling tenderness as she watched him suckle her breast, hoping that he'd find comfort here for awhile. She couldn't take away the pain of the past, or the troubles of the present, but she hoped he could have some relief, an escape for a time, here in her arms. When Maglor's lips let go of her nipple he rested his head on her heart for a moment, seeming to sense how she felt, and then he planted a kiss on her heart, which made her smile.

"I love you," Ali said again, stroking his face.

"I love you too." Then Maglor leered. "All of you."

Ali cackled, and grabbed his nose. "Pervert."

It was still a relief knowing that Maglor was OK with her being in a female body these days... or a bit more than OK, as evidenced when Maglor returned to licking a nipple, slow, sensual, teasing, deliberate strokes, then faster, fucking it with his tongue, before sucking hard. Ali sighed, enjoying the way it felt, and how sexy he looked pleasuring her this way. She thought about what else that tongue could do, and a shiver went through her, her cunt throbbing with need. Maglor licked around the nipple in lazy circles, then faster, as his tongue rubbed her belly in slow circles. As he lapped at the nipple again, his fingers walked down to her bush, slowly. Ali's breath hitched as Maglor sucked more of her breast into his mouth this time, both the nipple and aureole. He nibbled on the nipple before he turned his head to love the other nipple, and his fingers rested at her cleft, not yet going farther, just teasing her in anticipation of his touch.

As he suckled the nipple, their eyes met, and Ali moaned at the heat in his eyes. She moaned again, louder, as his fingers finally slid to the most intimate part of her, gently caressing, exploring. When Maglor's lips let go of the nipple, he groaned and said, "How can you be this wet already?"

"You."

Maglor laughed softly. His fingers played there for another moment as he watched her react, smiling at the way she moaned and gasped and trembled. His fingers gently stroked her clit, and then slipped inside her, pushing in and out, making her cry out. He took his fingers out of her and she saw them slick with her juices. He brought his fingers to his lips and Ali watched as he sucked her juices from his fingers, eyes narrowed, making a little hum of appreciation as he savored, like he was sampling a wine or eating a delicious berry. Ali's nipples and cunt throbbed, wanting what she knew was on his mind.

But Maglor was going to take his time getting there. He leaned in to kiss her, and as they kissed, his fingers rubbed and pinched her nipples, then walked down from her heart to her stomach, and down from her stomach to her mound. He kissed and licked her neck and throat as his fingers played down there again, slowly rubbing her clit, sliding into her and fucking her slowly, then back to caress her clit some more. She was dripping now - she could feel her thighs soaked - and he showed her how wet his fingers were from her. Instead of tasting her from his fingers this time, she watched as he anointed her nipples with her own juices. She gave a broken sob as he lowered his head to lick the juices from her nipple, suckle hungrily, licking it clean, then she gave another cry, clutching at him as he turned his head to the other, tasting her juices from her other nipple, licking, sucking.

"Fuuuuck," Ali whined. She felt like she was going out of her mind with need and sensation, and they'd only just begun.

"Delicious," Maglor said, and kissed her as his fingers reached down again, gently playing with her clit, then playing inside her. Ali whimpered into the kiss and Maglor responded with a deeper groan, kissing her harder.

Ali cried out as Maglor anointed her nipples again, and started tasting her juices from her nipples again, licking harder and faster than before, suckling harder this time. Ali writhed, panting. "Dammit, Maglor, just... fucking..." She loved what he was doing to her nipples, but she wanted his tongue lower. Ali couldn't even make words to tell him what she

wanted, letting out another strangled sob as he nibbled on a nipple before sucking it hard.

Maglor's cock continued rubbing against her thigh, and she could feel his own cock was slick with precum; he wanted this as badly as she did. Ali reached down to rub the slit of Maglor's cock, and Maglor watched as she brought her fingers up to her lips to taste his precum. Maglor moaned, and Ali felt his cock jolt against her. *Somebody likes that.* And Ali liked it too, licking her lips. She had a flash of memory, Maedhros sucking him until Maglor spilled in his mouth, the light sweetness of his cream. She wanted to please him, too.

Now Maglor was kissing and licking his way down, starting with the hollow between her breasts, down her belly, down to her mound, rubbing his nose in her bush. Her thighs were already parted and he spread her wider. He took a good look at her. "You are *so* fucking wet," Maglor rasped, looking almost in awe.

He leaned in then, and took his first lick. Ali cried out and bucked against him again, clutching his head. Maglor groaned into her, and took another look at her. "So pretty," he whispered, before he moved in and got to work.

His tongue was feather-light at first, teasing. Then he was kissing her clit, sipping at her flowing juices. Ali was completely lost in pleasure, and the sexy look in his eyes as he watched her, listened to her. The pleasure intensified as his tongue lashed at her, faster and faster, and when he started sucking on her clit Ali grabbed his hair, screaming. She had a flash of memory - Maglor sucking Maedhros's cock, Maedhros grabbing Maglor's hair. Maglor groaned, enjoying having his hair pulled, and Ali yanked on it some more. Just before she could come from the way he sucked her clit, Maglor took a few slow, teasing licks at her clit and then his tongue was inside her, slurping loudly at her juices. Ali cried out as his tongue rubbed away inside her, teasing, and soon she grabbed his head and started fucking his face, harder when his fingers played with her clit as his tongue worked inside her. Then he was licking at her clit again, his fingers thrusting in and out of her, building the tension and pleasure deeper, higher. At last, with him sucking on her clit, fingering her, she was right there, thrashing, panting, gasping and whimpering. She let out a frantic scream of "don'tsstopdon'tstopdon'tstop *don't you fucking stop*" and Maglor moaned "mmmm, *mmmmmm*" into her in response, shaking his head, sucking harder. Ali felt like she could break from the pleasure-tension wound so tight, and then it shattered and she went flying, screaming into her orgasm, throbbing deliciously.

Maglor took a few slow licks as she throbbed and contracted, and then as she lay there blissed out, she watched Maglor taste her from his fingers. The sight of him enjoying her cream got her going again, and he sensed it and dove back in to start licking again. It was *so* good when she was sensitive from her orgasm, bringing her to that edge right away, and when he started sucking her clit again, fingers rubbing inside her, Ali was right there again... but through the haze of need, she thought about Maglor's own need, memories of Maglor and Maedhros sucking each other. She grabbed at his hair again and picked his head up. "I want to take care of you too," she husked.

Maglor lay on his back, and Ali climbed on top of him, sitting on his face, her own head above the hard, dripping cock, flushed, veins prominent, looking almost angry in its need. As Maglor began to lick her again, this time more slowly, teasingly, Ali took Maglor's cock in her mouth, sucking. She enjoyed giving blowjobs, making a man lose control, and there was something about having her mouth full of cock that was soothing as well as arousing. Now they were taking comfort together, Ali sucking Maglor's cock as Maglor lapped and sucked at Ali's clit. It didn't take them long for them to both get to that place, close to orgasm but not wanting it to end, lost in sensation, everything else fading away but the blinding glory of desire and pleasure and hunger. Ali sucked harder, faster, her hand

reaching to gently cup and rub Maglor's balls as she sucked. She loved the sound and feel of him groaning into her, feeling his own pleasure across their bond. His talented tongue brought her closer and closer, until finally she was riding his face, fucking herself on his tongue again, and a moment later she had another climax, whimpering around the cock in her mouth as her body shuddered. Then Maglor's hands tightened on her, the split-second warning before her mouth was filled with his release. It was just as delicious as Ali had remembered, and Ali swallowed it down.

Ali turned around and they kissed, tasting themselves together. The sensual kissing got Ali worked up again, and she started rubbing against him, which made Maglor chuckle. Still laying on his back, he pulled Ali atop him, and guided her forward, her breasts in his face. As he drew a nipple into his mouth, Ali felt Maglor's cock quicken again, and she groaned with approval. She moaned as he lapped the nipple, nibble, sucked, and moaned louder as he worked on the other. His hands slid down to her hips and he began to guide her hips forward, and she realized then he wanted her to sit on his face. She straddled his shoulders and he buried his face in her again, tongue lashing fast and furious, slurping at her juices. Then his tongue slowed down, licking so slowly that Ali made a sobbing noise at how something could feel so delicious and yet so frustrating all at once. After a few more slow licks, Maglor moved his head back and looked up at her. "Do you want to ride me?" he asked.

"Twist my arm," Ali quipped, and Maglor playfully twisted her arm, which made her tweak his nose before she scooted down to straddle his hips. Maglor watched intently as she sank down. The feeling of Maglor's cock pushing inside her was so right that Ali could have wept.

She grabbed Maglor's shoulders and began to ride. His talented fingers were back on her clit, playing with it as he watched her riding him. He began to thrust into her, making her work for it, harder and harder. Ali held on harder, bucking, gasping for breath, the feeling of Maglor's fingers on her clit and his cock stroking inside her getting her closer and closer. When she felt herself rushing towards that point of no return, she grabbed the hand playing with her clit, and pleaded, "Don't stop. Don't stop, I'm gonna come -"

"Come, my love."

Maglor's voice sent her over the edge, Ali throwing back her head and screaming, not able to keep it down, as her climax throbbed through her. Her fingers and toes curled, and she contracted again as Maglor grabbed her hips and let out a long moan, trembling. They took each other's hands and squeezed, coming together, and then Ali took Maglor's face in her hands and came down, kissing him deeply.

Maglor held her close, petting her locks as she buried her face in his chest, listening to the thunder of his heart, slowing as the pleasure ebbed. There was peace now, a soft, radiant contentment...

...feeling like they'd come home. Whatever else happened, they'd found their way back to each other across the ages. They'd found this. It was like a forest growing back after a fire, fresh and new.

At last Maglor spoke. "I love you."

"I love you." Ali looked up and met his eyes.

Maglor's smile filled her with heartbreaking joy. She stroked his face, and he pulled her into a soft, sweet kiss. Then Maglor sighed. "I feel I should apologize."

"For what?" Ali raised an eyebrow. *You had better not be getting down on yourself about "letting me die" or any of that shit.*

But what came out next surprised and tickled her. "I feel like I was... a barbarian, mauling you like that. When I'd thought about confessing my feelings to you, I envisioned myself much more of a gentleman."

Ali couldn't help laughing. The high of her orgasm made her laugh harder at it than she normally would, and she rolled onto her back, wheezing, shaking. Then when she calmed down, she propped herself up on one elbow and gave him a look. "Does it look like I particularly minded?"

"Well, no. But..."

Ali silenced him with a kiss. Then she started snorting and spluttering again. "A gentleman."

"I'm being serious," Maglor said, though he was grinning. He stroked Ali's cheek. "This isn't just sex for me."

"No shit, Sherlock, it isn't just sex for me either."

"I know, but..." Maglor sobered a bit. "I'd wanted to take you on a proper date, and..."

Ali giggled. "That's so old-fashioned. Oh wait, you are old."

"You used to be older," Maglor said, "so you can't really talk."

Ali was actually delighted, finding it cute. "You can still take me out on a date if you want. I won't say no."

"Good. I'd like to do that soon."

Ali looked over at the cell phone on the small table next to the bed. It floated over to her and she grabbed it, pulling up the calendar, even though her schedule was flexible. Then she had another gigglefit when she saw what today's date was.

"What?" Maglor asked.

"At least it'll be easy to remember when our anniversary is." Ali showed him the calendar. "Today is June 9th. Six-nine."

"Nice," Maglor said, smiling.

"Nice," Ali said, and collapsed on him as they laughed together.

Chapter 21

Sören and Frankie are sitting out in the sun, under a perfect blue sky, by the seashore. Sören is holding his baby son, and he and Frankie are fussing over the boy, nuzzling each other and stealing little kisses. "He's perfect." "We made this." "I love you."

Suddenly Frankie is flung back, as if Force thrown, and besieged by a pack of Balrogs. Sören knows this scene all too well - it is an echo of his death as Fëanor - and though Sören risks dying again by doing so he runs towards them. "FRANKIE!" he screams.

He reaches out with the Force, but before he can pull Frankie towards him, the Balrogs lash her and she goes up in flames, screaming. Sören screams too, and then he hears his baby son crying, realizing he is unattended on the ground. Feeling like a horrible parent who endangered his own child, he runs back to the crying baby, while continuing to look in the direction of the Balrogs at Frankie continuing to burn, screeching. Sören is sobbing, heart hammering in his ears, feeling like he's going to be sick.

Anthony has the baby, and shields the baby with his body just as a Balrog comes towards him. Before Sören can try to Force throw the Balrog out of the way, Anthony is lashed with a flaming whip...

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Sören woke up screaming, in a cold sweat.

He sat up, heart pounding. He was shaking - he looked down at his hands, which were trembling - and he felt a violent wave of nausea. He took some deep breaths, trying to get himself under control, but his mind's eye kept replaying the nightmare, all too vivid...

...all too real. It felt more like a memory than a dream, though it hadn't happened.

Huan came running into the room with a whimper, giving him a concerned look as if to say *Are you OK?* Huan hopped up on the bed and stood with his front paws up on Sören's shoulders, licking Sören's face with his stinky dog breath. Sören couldn't help chuckling as he tousled the dog's fur; Huan was so cute.

Then Sören heard the girls crying. Huan pulled back with another whimper. Sören ran down to the nursery. He knew that the babies had probably heard him screaming, and he felt that sharp jab of guilt. *You're a terrible parent.* His mind's eye once again replayed the horror of his baby on the ground, unattended...

Sören shuddered. He picked Kate up out of the crib and brought her over to the changing area, then he carried Tori over. He proceeded to change their diapers and clothes, and then he put on the baby sling and carried them down to the kitchen for feeding. Huan and the cats also decided it was time to eat, and Sören couldn't help smiling at the animals eating at their food dishes as he spoon-fed his daughters.

There was a note on the kitchen table; Ali and Kenny had gone out grocery shopping and would be back soon. Once the girls were fed, Sören went to the fridge - he typically made a big pot of oatmeal to last for a week, and now he heated some up; once it was ready he added brown sugar and a cup of *skyr*. The oatmeal, which had a thick crust, was one of

the little ways Sören clung to his Icelandic roots. He felt that twinge of nostalgia, missing Iceland. He tried not to think about it, taking a banana to have with his oatmeal, and of course, his brain decided the distraction he needed was thinking about the nightmare again.

Logically he knew that not every dream he had came true, or he would have met Elton John and RuPaul by now, and he would have pet dragons, and he would live on the moon, or in Jurassic Park. He tried to tell himself that his subconscious was regurgitating feelings from the waking day - in this case, the Balrogs were a natural choice for his mind to fixate on, since it had been how Fëanor had died, and Finarfin, and Frankie's ex had once been a Balrog, and the attack was symbolic of Sören's fear of something happening to Frankie, and, now, fear of something happening to Anthony.

You love him. Sören's face was on fire. He couldn't deny that he had fallen in love with Anthony Hewlett-Johnson. And of course, as he thought of Anthony, now was the time when he was peeling the banana and put the tip in his mouth. Immediately his mind went in the gutter, thinking about sucking Anthony's cock.

Not that he would do anything about that lust, or that love. It was bad enough he'd gotten involved with Frankie, and would lose her someday, and have to move on without her. Losing Anthony too... Sören closed his eyes. He was already in too deep with his feelings, he didn't want to make it worse by acting on them. He shoved more of the banana in his mouth, and naturally his mind went right back to Anthony's cock.

Ali and Kenny came back from grocery shopping before Sören was done with his oatmeal. After Sören helped put the groceries away and put his dishes in the sink, he checked the clock. It was Friday the eleventh; Anthony was coming over for Krav. Maglor was also coming home early today, since this had been an emotional week for him and he wanted an afternoon just to relax; Maglor would probably be getting in just as Sören and Anthony were finishing up.

Because Sören had slept in - though he barely felt rested - he had just enough time to do some pole exercises, per his daily morning routine, and then take down the pole and freshen up a little before Anthony came over. So once Ali took over with the girls, Sören changed into dark grey gym shorts - with a protective cup - and a plain black T-shirt, both for Krav and his daily pole workout.

Now that Sören was getting the hang of the pole, he liked having music as he worked the pole, especially something sexy and rhythmic that wouldn't be out of place if he was doing a pole dancing routine in a strip club. He put on "Ride" by Ciara and began to walk around the pole.

I can do it big
I can do it long
I can do whenever or however you want
I can do it up and down
I can do it circles
To him I'm a gymnast
This ring is my circus
I market it so good
They can't wait to try I I I I
Me e e a a

Sören climbed up the pole, and this time instead of saving the pole-sitting as the final exercise, he sat towards the top of the pole to push himself, to start building endurance.

After sitting at the pole for a minute, his body throbbing with the tension in his thighs, he slid down. Then he did the fireman spin, gripping the pole with his hands a foot apart, stepping with his right foot and bringing his left leg around, using his arms to pull himself up as he kicked off with the momentum, and as he gripped the pole with his knees he began to spin down.

He love the way I ride it
He love the way I ride it
He love the way I ride it
He love the way I ride the beat
Ride ride the beat, how I ride it

He love the way I ride it
He love the way I ride it
He love the way I ride it
He love the way I ride the beat
Like a motherfuckin freak

The last move was the cradle spin, a new technique for Sören. He stood next to the pole, putting his outside hand on the pole level with his nose, palm facing him, and his inside hand was further down, palm facing outwards. He stepped with his outside foot to gain momentum, and brought his inside leg up, the outside of his thigh pressing the pole. He rolled to the top of the thigh and brought his knees together, tucking his body in, and began to spin around the pole, his body arching around the pole as he spun down.

Ohh baby baby baby
Do you like it up when I'm up
When I'm down, when I'm down
Ohh baby baby baby
He can't stand to look away
When I'm whirling this around

Oh baby baby you like it
When I take it up and down...
Oh baby he love it when
I twirl this thang on

He love the way I ride it
He love the way I ride it
He love the way I ride it
He love the way I ride the beat
Like a motherfuckin freak

He could feel the burn in his muscles, especially his thighs and abs and arms, but he also felt that giddy, euphoric rush. Not just of accomplishment - though it was a source of pride that he could do this - but also the beauty of it. Dancing was art, a new way to express himself, and he felt the same sort of creative high he got when he painted or made pottery, except his body was the canvas, the clay, and this was far more ephemeral than a painting or ceramic piece. But the ephemeral nature of dance was fitting for something more visceral, emotion coming through him as he moved his body to the music. Sören thought of the axis mundi across ancient mythologies, usually depicted as some sort of tree. The pole was his World Tree, and spinning on it was transcendent. As his muscles burned, he felt the Flame Imperishable within him, burning as strongly as it ever had.

He felt like he was awakening.

He put the song on repeat and practiced the lineup a few more times - the climb, the sit, the fireman spin, the cradle spin. Between each repeat of the song he checked the time on his cell phone, wanting to make sure he stopped with enough time left to dissemble the pole and freshen up before Anthony's arrival; he was a sweaty mess from working the pole. And then, just as he was shutting off his portable mp3 player to get ready, Anthony came walking into the meditation room. Sören froze.

Anthony also paused. He glanced at the pole, then at Sören, sweaty in his workout clothes. "Hi," Anthony said, sounding a bit nervous and hesitant.

"Hhhhiiiiiiiiiii." Sören put a hand on his hip and raised an eyebrow, cocking his head to one side. "You're early."

"I couldn't shake the feeling that something was wrong. I tried calling, but..."

Sören of course had his phone shut off while he was pole dancing. "Jæja," Sören said, rubbing his beard, then running a nervous hand through his curls, realizing he was going to have to put his hair up. "I, ah. I was, ah."

And then Sören had another realization - Anthony had felt that disturbance of Sören waking up screaming from a nightmare. Even though they weren't technically involved, they nonetheless were beginning to form a Force bond. The thought sent a shiver down Sören's spine.

Yes, he was definitely in over his head, and yet he couldn't just tell Anthony to go away.

"So, is everything all right?" Anthony gave him a concerned look.

Sören nodded. He didn't want to tell Anthony *it was nothing* about the "something wrong" feeling Anthony had, that felt like gaslighting, so he swallowed his pride - and his discomfort with the Force bond forming between them, that hard proof of attachment - and said simply, "I had a nightmare."

"Ah." Anthony took a deep breath and nodded. "I'm sorry."

"Jæja." Sören didn't want to tell him what about, didn't want to admit*I'm worried about losing you, I'm already too attached to you and we haven't even touched.*

"Well..." Anthony shifted his weight from one foot to the other. "Let's get to our Krav lesson. That'll help distract you, and will also help with taking back a sense of control, a sense of power."

Anthony wasn't wrong, but Sören usually took down his pole before lessons to not have that space taken up in the room. He glanced at it, and Anthony shook his head as if he knew what Sören was thinking. "In a real-life situation where you'd need to use Krav, you may have all sorts of obstacles around. Better to just leave that there."

"OK." Sören couldn't fault that logic, and it wasn't like the pole was huge - it was tall and slim - but Sören worried about crashing into a metal pole as they moved around the room. Still, that was part of his training too, was learning how to maneuver.

Sören was about to put his hair up, at least, and Anthony said, "Leave it down."

"Oh?"

"You hardly ever put your hair up outside of this space. In a situation where you'd need to defend yourself, your hair is probably going to be down, so we might as well account for the likelihood of your hair being used as a weapon against you."

Then Anthony broadcasted, *And I like looking at it.* Anthony's cheeks turned a delicate shade of pink.

Sören knew the attraction was mutual - that was part of the problem - and even though he knew acting on it was a bad, bad idea, Sören's stomach fluttered at that anyway. Then he realized Anthony would be grabbing his hair this time as they sparred, and a frisson went through Sören at that, and his mind immediately went into the gutter, a delicious fantasy of Anthony grabbing his hair as Anthony fucked him hard.

Focus. Now was not the time to be thinking about sex; Sören had to prepare for war, not love. Sören took some deep breaths.

They started off stretching, and then did their warm-up exercises: Anthony running around the room and Sören following him, then Anthony running sideways and Sören running sideways next to him, and then push-ups, then high knee kicks.

Their first drill was Sören blocking a front choke, which they repeated five times, then the next drill was Sören having to defend himself against a bear hug from behind, another five-time repetition. Then it was time for something new.

"Today you're going to learn how to disarm an attacker with a gun," Anthony said, "since you now know how to use one. I wasn't going to teach you this part until I knew you could shoot."

Their lessons at the range were still ongoing, of course, but Sören did at least know how to shoot a pistol now. Even as Sören was less uncomfortable with guns than he was just a few short weeks ago, he still felt that apprehensive prickle.

"This is just the first part of learning defense against a gun," Anthony went on, "is how to defend against an attack from the front. In future lessons I'll be teaching you how to defend against an attack from behind, and the side. I'll also be teaching you how to defend yourself against a knife, at some point. As well as other ways to defend yourself - for example, how to get out of a full nelson." Noticing Sören's confusion, he said, "That's a wrestling grip."

"OK." Sören swallowed hard.

"You still have a lot to learn, we have a lot of ground to cover. But for today..." Anthony put in a mouth guard, then took a fake gun out that he'd brought with him. It had a laser, and Anthony pointed it at the pole so Sören could see the red dot on the pole, then Anthony pointed it at his chest, and Sören looked down at the red dot on his shirt. "I'm left-handed, but I'm going to put this in my right hand today, since most people are right-handed and that's the side an attacker would probably be attacking you from."

Anthony motored him through, working slowly step-by-step. He instructed Sören to extend his left hand and redirect the muzzle of the weapon between his thumb and index finger, and as Sören's left hand closed around the muzzle, Sören's right hand drew up and back into a clenched fist. With Sören's left hand closed firmly around the barrel of the gun, Sören lunged towards Anthony, driving the knuckles of his left hand into Anthony's right hip, and using his right hand to punch Anthony in the face.

Anthony's weight went down on his heels, and Sören's right hand pulled back as he rotated with his left hand, also rotating the pistol and breaking Anthony's grip. Sören pulled the pistol into his right hand, clearing Anthony's grip and stepping away.

Just that first drill, going slowly, following Anthony's commands, Sören felt a sense of uneasiness. He remembered when Justin threatened him with a gun. And he knew whatever government agency or terrorist cell had taken Dag very likely had guns. It was one thing to hold a gun and use it in a controlled setting like the range. It was another thing to rip it out of the hands of an attacker. Even with it just being Anthony, in the safety of his own home, Sören felt that sickening flood of adrenaline.

But they weren't done yet. They motored through the exercise a second time, faster than the first introduction but still slow, to make sure Sören knew what he was doing. The third time was at full speed, and the fourth, and the fifth. After the fifth drill Sören was visibly shaking and felt like he was going to puke.

The next drill was another new technique: Sören defending himself from a hair grab. "Today we're just doing the front," Anthony said. "Eventually you'll learn to defend yourself from hair grabs to the side and to the rear, as well."

Sören's head was spinning - there was, indeed, so much to learn. He refocused, eyes meeting Anthony's. The first round was, as always, slow. As Anthony came forward and grabbed a fistful of Sören's hair, Sören reached up to put both his hands on Anthony's wrist as he dropped down, then wrenched Anthony's arm to the side, wrenching Anthony's body down along with him. With Anthony's head close to his elbows, Sören elbowed Anthony in the head, and as Anthony loosened his grip, Sören punched him and shoved him onto the ground.

The second drill went a little faster, and then they were going at full speed. Except this time, instead of Sören feeling sick like he had with the gun disarming, he found himself getting aroused by Anthony grabbing his hair, and when Anthony was down on the ground Sören fought the urge to throw himself on top of Anthony and kiss him hard, bite him...

They finished up the day's lesson with the fury drill, Anthony holding the strike pad against himself as Sören punched and kicked as hard and fast as he could, a whirlwind of ferocity. After ten minutes of non-stop movement, and all the day's work, Sören was winded, hearing himself gasp for breath as they took a seat on the bench.

"You did well," Anthony said, using the Force to pass Sören a bottle of water.

Sören could only nod in acknowledgment, too out of breath to make words just yet.

Anthony let Sören rest, and Sören noticed Anthony kept looking at the pole, stealing glances at him, then looking at the pole again.

Sören finally was able to say something when his breathing slowed. "What?"

Anthony gave a nervous little chuckle. "So... I've been meaning to ask you..." Anthony looked over at him and their eyes met. "What do you do for your fitness regimen?"

Sören gestured over at the pole. "I, ah." Sören swallowed hard, feeling self-conscious - worrying Anthony would think it was stupid, even a bit sluttish, then feeling annoyed with himself for worrying about Anthony's reaction. "I took up pole dancing."

"I see."

"It's very athletic," Sören said. "It builds up strength in your arms and abs and legs."

"I imagine it would have to, if you're having to hold up your own body weight on the pole," Anthony said. He looked at the pole, then back at Sören. "I can tell you're building up endurance."

"I'm still not where I should be," Sören said, now feeling self-conscious about how winded he was at the end of practice.

"You're better than where you were a few weeks ago." Anthony raised an eyebrow, and his cheeks turned pink again. "May I see... a routine? If I can see how you move on the pole, I can get an idea of your strengths and weaknesses with conditioning."

Sören's face was on fire now, but he wasn't going to say no; part of him thrilled to the idea of showing off for Anthony, while part of him worried about looking like an idiot since he was still a beginner.

Sören walked over to the stereo. Since he'd listened to "Ride" by Ciara on repeat, he didn't want to play that again as he did his routine. He hit the skip button and the next song on shuffle was "Pony" by Ginuwine. That would have to do. Sören began to walk circles around the pole, hands sliding, almost caressing.

I'm just a bachelor
I'm looking for a partner
Someone who knows how to ride
Without even falling off
Gotta be compatible
Takes me to my limits
Girl when I break you off
I promise that you won't want to get off

Sören began to climb the pole.

If you're horny, let's do it
Ride it, my pony
My saddle's waiting
Come and jump on it

Sören sat on the pole, gripping with his thighs, muscles burning. Anthony's eyes were riveted, and Sören's face burned as much as his thighs.

If you're horny, let's do it
Ride it, my pony
My saddle's waiting
Come and jump on it

Sören slid down the pole, then he did the fireman spin, going slowly.

Sitting here flossing
Peeping your steelo
Just once if I have the chance
The things I will do to you

You and your body
Every single portion
Send chills up and down your spine
Juices flowing down your thigh

Their eyes met again, and Sören resisted the urge to take his shirt off. He did another circle walk around the pole, and a bend, arching himself back as far as he could go.

If you're horny, let's do it
Ride it, my pony
My saddle's waiting
Come and jump on it

Now Sören wanted to show off a little, and practiced the cradle spin as the song came to its climax.

If we're gonna get nasty, baby
First we'll show and tell
Till I reach your ponytail
Lurk all over and through you baby
Until we reach the stream
You'll be on my jockey team

He did a second cradle spin during the final chorus, feeling almost as if he were flying.

If you're horny, let's do it
Ride it, my pony
My saddle's waiting
Come and jump on it

When the song was over Sören gave an awkward little bow, and Anthony clapped slowly. Their eyes met again, and across their developing bond, Sören could feel Anthony's raw, hungry lust. Sören knew that he could go right over to Anthony, kiss him, and Anthony would let him ride his cock for hours, and Sören was so tempted it was almost painful, his cock stirring awake under the cup in his gym shorts. But Sören made himself hold back, even as taking his seat next to Anthony on the bench - feeling the proximity of Anthony's body, the heat of him - was making his nerves scream for sexual release. Sören's mind started racing with Anthony grabbing his hair again, wanting them to roll around, scratching, biting, before they took turns conquering each other. A shiver went down Sören's spine.

"That's really amazing," Anthony said, looking at the pole, then at Sören.

"I'm still just a beginner. I have more techniques to learn. But it's a good workout."

"Looks like it."

Sören licked his lips, and then reached for the water. He was sweating again, and he fought the urge to ask Anthony to take a shower with him. He *wanted.* And knowing Anthony wanted, made him want all the more.

But Anthony was holding back, too. Sören could feel that across their bond, as much as he could feel Anthony's lust. Anthony was hesitating. And Sören had no doubt that Anthony could feel Sören's lust for him, as much as Sören could feel Anthony's lust. That Anthony would know that the feeling was mutual and still not want to act on it...

"OK," Anthony said, and took a deep breath. Sören felt a twinge of anxiety - for a moment he thought Anthony was going to say *we can't meet like this anymore, this is too risky*, and that thought tore him apart, but then Anthony said, "What you do on the pole is definitely..." Anthony's cheeks flushed again, as he broadcasted *Hot as fuck.* Then Anthony found his words. "It's good. You're doing it every day?"

Sören nodded.

"You should keep at it. But I think that you need something else in addition to that." Before Sören could protest, Anthony said, "Most athletes cross-train. When I was in the service, I didn't just hit the gym, but I also went running every day. I still run every day."

"Oh god." The words came out before Sören could stop himself. He wasn't asthmatic anymore, but he had too many memories of trying to run when he did have asthma, and even though his body had been getting a little stronger between Krav and the pole exercises, he knew he wasn't quite in shape to run.

"Look," Anthony said. "It'll help with endurance, and you need that, especially if you're fighting... weird... supernatural... stuff." Anthony sounded profoundly uncomfortable with that. "And it'll be another outlet, something else you can do to cope. When I was a kid I started running, and it helped me survive the turmoil of my teenage years." Anthony gave a little frown. "That was one of the worst things about injuring my ankle last year, I couldn't run for a bit."

Sören knew what he was saying was true, but Sören still didn't like it. He had the same sort of aversion to running that some people had of going to the dentist.

And then Anthony said, "To be honest, it would be nice to have someone to go running with."

"I'd just slow you down," Sören said, looking away, face on fire. "I'm not good at running -"

"Everyone has to start somewhere. I'd rather have you as company on a run even if I have to stop more, can't go as long or as fast, than run by myself."

It was an excuse to spend more time with Anthony, even though more time spent together would make it more difficult for Sören to resist. Sören swallowed hard. "You go running every day, já?"

"Every day. I mean, we're seeing each other most days of the week anyway..."

"OK." Sören sighed. "I apologize in advance, I know I'm going to suck -"

Anthony broadcasted the mental image of Sören giving him a blowjob, and then the mental image went away - Anthony was fighting this too. Sören's fists clenched, wanting to eat him alive. Anthony gave him a reassuring little pat, and just that touch made Sören's cock throb in his shorts. "Like I said, everyone has to start somewhere," Anthony said. "I'll give you a couple days to get adjusted to the idea, and we can start Monday?"

There was at least that. Sören nodded. "Monday, then."

Anthony looked at his watch. "I'm going to head out," Anthony said. "I have some chores and errands to do..." Sören heard Anthony broadcast, *I need to get out of here before I tear your fucking clothes off.*

"All right." Sören wasn't going to persuade Anthony to stay awhile - because Sören was fighting that same urge. "Thank you for the lesson today. I'll see you Sunday?"

"You will." Anthony nodded and gave a tight smile as he rose. "Have a good rest of the day and tomorrow, Sören."

Sören watched Anthony's ass on the way out. Sören took a moment to sit there, feeling dazed, before he himself got up.

Sören's entire body ached, and he needed a shower. But above and beyond that, his cock was hard, as his mind kept replaying Anthony grabbing his hair during the Krav practice... the look of lust in Anthony's eyes as Sören worked the pole. Sören had wanted a distraction after the horror of his nightmare, but this was a bit more than he'd bargained for.

Sören headed for the kitchen for some cold lemonade, and ended up pausing at the glass doors in the living room, leading out to the back, as he saw Maglor sitting outside, tossing a ball to Huan. Sören leaned against the wall, watching Maglor playing with the dog, looking peaceful, even happy, and Sören couldn't help smiling. He loved Maglor fiercely and it was so good to see him looking content, after the troubles of the last month. And Maglor was beautiful to look at; Sören thought it was very sexy when Maglor was in a nurturing, tender mood, like he was now with the dog.

Then Sören felt it, across his growing Force bond with Anthony. Sören got a mental image of Anthony sitting in his Audi in the carport, cock out, stroking himself to climax right there, not able to wait. Moaning Sören's name as he leaned back in his seat, shuddering.

Sören's breath hitched, and his own cock jolted. He felt like he was losing his mind. Not thinking, just feeling - wanting - he opened the sliding glass door and marched towards Maglor. Maglor grinned over his shoulder. "Hi, Ada -"

Sören grabbed Maglor by his hair, yanking him up to his feet... up into a kiss. Maglor moaned into the kiss, and again as Sören began pushing him back towards the house, kissing him and kissing him. Huan followed them inside, and Sören used the Force to slam the glass doors shut. Then Sören pulled Maglor by the hair towards the bedroom, with Maglor laughing all the way.

"Wow," Maglor said.

Once they were in the bedroom, Sören let go of Maglor's hair. They looked at each other for a moment - the heat in Maglor's eyes made Sören's cock throb again - and now it was Maglor who initiated the kiss, and began peeling off Sören's damp workout clothes. With trembling hands, Sören started undressing Maglor as well.

Naked, they climbed onto the bed together, and after a deep, passionate kiss they held each other, looking into each other's eyes before rubbing noses and kissing more softly, sweetly. Maglor stroked Sören's face, pet his damp curls. His eyes raked Sören up and down and he husked, "You look so hot all sweaty like this."

Sören chuckled. "I need a shower."

"I can help give you a bath." With that, Maglor rolled Sören onto his back and proceeded to lick Sören all over. He started with the neck, knowing how sensitive Sören was there, and the sweet hollow where the neck and shoulder met. He licked down to the nipples,

lapping, suckling, tugging the nipple rings with his teeth before sucking harder. He licked an armpit, then down the side of Sören's body to the hip. Across the stomach, to the other hip, and up the other side to the other armpit. Then he was licking Sören's nipples again, and licking down Sören's chest, to his stomach. Maglor's tongue slid down the seam of Sören's crotch to his thigh, and he licked the thigh down to the hollow behind the knee, then licked the calf. He even licked Sören's foot, sucking on the toes, making Sören giggle and sigh, not realizing his feet were so sensitive, too. Maglor took the other foot, sucking the toes, licking the other foot, then up the calf, knee, and thigh. He rubbed his nose in the damp curls of Sören's bush and licked that, too, and at last took a few slow, deliberate licks at Sören's cock. When Maglor's lips wrapped around Sören's cock and it disappeared into Maglor's mouth inch by inch, Maglor sucking slowly, Sören almost came right then and there.

Maglor sucked him slowly, eyes locked with his, hunger in Maglor's eyes. Hunger that Sören's body returned, cock pulsing in Maglor's mouth, balls tightening, nipples aching. While Sören's lust was sparked by Anthony, now his focus was on Maglor. He grabbed Maglor's hair again and Maglor began sucking harder, faster. One of Maglor's hands cupped Sören's balls and began to rub slowly, gently, which intensified Sören's pleasure. Sören thought Maglor looked delicious sucking his cock like this - those eyes, like diamonds, blazing his soul - and Sören *wanted*. Maglor hummed as he sucked, the vibration making it even more intense, getting Sören close to that edge. But Sören wanted to *fuck*, and before he could come in Maglor's mouth, he yanked Maglor's hair, pulling Maglor off his cock. He gestured for Maglor to come up, and they kissed, and in that kiss, Sören rolled Maglor onto his back.

Sören used the Force to get the lube from the bedtable. He poured lube onto Maglor's hand, and guided Maglor's hand to his own cock. They kissed again as Maglor stroked Sören's cock, working the lube over it. Sören poured lube onto his own hand and reached down to slip a finger inside Maglor, finding that spot right away, rubbing. One finger became two, then three, and Maglor was fucking himself on Sören's fingers, panting between kisses, gripping Sören's cock harder. Maglor spread to Sören and arched his back, looking up at Sören expectantly, guiding Sören's cock to his passage.

Sören sank into him slowly, shivering at the tight, silken heat wrapped around his cock. When Sören was all the way in, Maglor pulled him down into a deep, hungry kiss. Then Sören began to thrust. After a couple of slow, teasing thrusts, Sören kissed him again and started to pound away, lost in the deliciousness of the way Maglor felt, and the deliciousness of Maglor's moans, the way Maglor bucked underneath him, urging him on faster. Maglor grabbed Sören's hips, moaning "yes Ada, yes... fuck me, Ada... just like that..."

Maglor felt too good, and Sören was so pent up he knew he wasn't going to last long. He reached between them and took Maglor's cock in his hand, stroking it in time with his thrusts, fast and furious. Maglor's cock was slick with precum, and Sören shivered at the feel of precum dripping over his hand, moaned at the sight of it. Sören drove into him even harder, the bed rocking against the wall.

"Ada. Ada. *Ada.*" Maglor was shaking now, gasping for breath, a look of ecstasy on his face. "Ada, don't stop, I'm so close..."

Sören growled, and kissed Maglor hard. His hand worked Maglor's cock even faster, so fast and hard his wrist ached, the cock making a rattling noise in his hand. Sören heard his balls slapping against Maglor as he pounded away, and Maglor moaned into the kiss, then let out a strangled sob as the kiss broke and Sören began to kiss and lick his neck. There was a wild, desperate look in Maglor's eyes, with Maglor clutching at him, and

Sören could feel how ready Maglor was to come. Sören's teeth nipped Maglor's neck with another growl, and Maglor's cock started shooting ropes of hot cream over Sören's chest as Maglor cried out. "Sören. Fëanor. Ada. *Ada!*" Then a long, strangled sob, Maglor shuddering.

Maglor's climax set Sören off, one last powerful thrust and then Sören exploded into him, burying his face in Maglor's chest with a sob as the pleasure throbbed through him. The room spun, Sören's heart thundering in his ears, and Maglor's arms were around him, holding him, rocking him. Sören melted, toes curling, and he kissed Maglor's heart before he gave a deep sigh, resting his chin on Maglor's chest, looking up into those beautiful silver eyes, shining with love.

After a few minutes of just laying there, feeling like he was made of jelly, Sören slid up to kiss Maglor again. The kiss quickly heated and Sören's cock came back to life. He slipped out of Maglor and now Maglor was reaching for the lube, coating his own hard cock before Sören straddled his hips and sank down.

Even as Sören's body ached from the pole dancing and the Krav, he needed this, riding Maglor hard, with Maglor making him work for it, fierce thrust after fierce, savage thrust. Maglor's cock hit that sweet spot inside him again and again, and when Maglor began to play with Sören's cock that made it even better. And the sight of Maglor underneath him, the hungry, determined look on his face... Sören shuddered. Each thrust of Maglor's cock, each buck of Sören's hips, built the pleasure and tension until they were both shaking, panting, gasping, desperate to come but not wanting this to end, the glory of sex... that feeling of being connected, fused together, nothing able to separate them ever again.

"Ada." Their eyes met, and the fingers of Maglor's free hand walked up from Sören's thigh, to his stomach, up his chest to play with a nipple, and then Maglor's hand rested on his heart. "I love you, Ada. I love you so much..."

"I love you, Kanafinwë." Sören took Maglor's hand and kissed it. "I love you. I love feeling you inside me, close to me, one with me..."

"I want to make you come, Ada." Maglor's hand strayed to play with Sören's nipple again. "Show me how beautiful you are when you come. Show me your fire..."

"Almost there." Sören bit his lip, a shiver going through him. He could feel himself flying to that point of no return...

"Come for me, Sören. Come, Ada."

Sören came with a cry, watching as his cock spent over Maglor's chest and throat, and two thrusts later Maglor growled, his entire body shaking as his hot seed flooded into Sören. Sören sighed, savoring the feel of it, and sank down into Maglor's chest, the two kissing deeply as the pleasure continued pulsing. They rubbed noses as they came down together into that feeling of bliss, of relief and peace. Maglor kissed Sören's brow and Sören kissed the tip of Maglor's nose, making him smile.

They rested for a bit, Sören's head in Maglor's shoulder, legs tangled up together. It felt cozy and Sören couldn't help smiling; this was exactly what he needed after the nightmare this morning. Everything bad felt far away when he was in Maglor's arms like this.

After awhile Maglor broke the silence, though his voice was soft. "How was Krav practice?"

Sören nodded. "Challenging. I learned how to disarm a gun today."

"Good."

Sören frowned. "Anthony wants me to start running, in addition to, ah, pole dancing."

"I don't think that's a bad idea."

"Yeah, it just..." Sören made a vague hand gesture. "Feels weird, I guess. I was never able to run before..." Sören didn't have to finish the sentence.

"Well, you never know when you might need to. Besides..." Maglor smiled. "It'll help you keep up with the kids."

Sören laughed. "There is that." And in Sören's mind's eye, he had a memory of Fëanor running with his hyperactive sons. The memory then turned to a memory of watching Ali and Kenny play in the park with Megadeth and Metallica months ago, and Sören feeling awkward as he sat on the side, watching. "Not just my kids, either."

"No. I'm sure Ali's kids would appreciate it."

"Speaking of..." Sören raised an eyebrow and cocked his head to one side. "You and Ali." He knew they had gotten together Wednesday night; he'd specifically reserved time to play video games with Kenny to give Ali and Maglor some alone time to talk, and probably do more than talk. "Is it a thing now?"

"It's a thing now." Maglor chuckled.

"Fucking finally."

Maglor laughed harder. Then he sobered as he said, "In my defense, we've had a lot going on this year."

"Yeah, that's a fucking understatement."

"And it still took less time for she and I to talk about things than, say, you and Frankie."

Sören gave him a look, even though he knew Maglor was right. Then Sören sighed - this time not from contentment but from disappointment as his mind began to replay the nightmare that woke him up screaming.

Maglor sensed it across their bond. He touched Sören's face, looking concerned. "Nightmare?"

Sören nodded. "Frankie burning up in flames."

"Oh, love." Maglor frowned, and then he gave Sören a sweet little kiss. "I'm sorry." He sighed too and began to rub Sören's back. "I want to tell you it gets easier, but it doesn't. That's one of the hardest things about being involved with a Mortal, is worrying about them. Wondering when the inevitable will happen."

"It fucking sucks." Sören closed his eyes, trying to cry. Trying to push the nightmare out of his mind, and of course, now his mind began replaying the part of the nightmare where Anthony was lashed by a Balrog's whip. Sören opened his eyes and looked into Maglor's eyes, full of compassion and understanding. "I also feel like I'm being, you know,

patronizing, worrying about Frankie. She can take care of herself. She beat up Justin Roberts."

"Yes, but we have enemies that make Justin look like an amateur." Maglor's arms tightened around Sören. "It's natural that you'd be concerned. I won't offer you any platitudes, any false assurances. I can only tell you that I'm here for you if you need to vent."

"*Takk.*"

Then Maglor cupped Sören's chin in his hand and gave him a stern look. "It's not just Frankie you're worried about."

"Well, no." Sören frowned. "Obviously there's my sister, and then Ali and Kenny too..."

"And Anthony Hewlett-Johnson."

Their eyes locked. Sören realized that Maglor *would* know about his attraction to Anthony - it wasn't exactly subtle, even without Sören's Force bond with Maglor. But even though Sören knew Maglor knew, he still didn't really want to have that talk about Anthony. Sören gave Maglor another look, then a little kiss, before resting his head on Maglor's shoulder again. "I don't want to talk about it right now."

"Fair. But you can't avoid the subject forever."

"No. But I was pretty shaken up this morning, after the nightmare, and I really don't want to... revisit all that. Or spoil the mood."

"All right." Maglor drew Sören in for another kiss, soft and lingering, and then another kiss, deeper, the passion sparking between them again. Sören moaned as he felt Maglor's cock harden up again inside him. "Let's... change the subject."

They kissed again, and Maglor gently rolled Sören onto his back. Sören's arms and legs wrapped around Maglor and their hips began to rock together, slowly, the fire of their love pushing away the darkness.

Chapter 22

Sören looked even more nervous today, as he was about to run with Anthony for the first time, than he did when he was beginning Krav and starting to practice shooting at the range a few weeks ago. Sören was getting the hang of both Krav and shooting, though he still looked apprehensive at the range, and it was Anthony's hope that Sören would eventually build confidence with running, especially since they were going to run daily, as opposed to Krav three times a week and shooting only once a week.

But even without that deer-in-the-headlights look, Anthony could *feel* how anxious Sören was, even as Sören kept trying to push aside his anxiety and focus on Krav. Anthony felt almost guilty about planning the run for after the practice rather than before to get it done and over with, but he knew Sören did the pole in the mornings and he didn't want Sören to be completely tapped out between the pole and the running before the Krav started, and he also knew Sören usually took time to rest after the Krav lesson so making him run after Krav would help build up endurance.

It was still hard to look at those anxious brown eyes, and harder to feel Sören's internal wheels spinning about running. Especially whenever Sören broadcasted *And I'm going to look like an ass, in front of this hot guy...*

Anthony knew Sören was attracted to him, and the feeling was very mutual. It was getting harder to resist, to the point where Anthony was starting to seriously question if he should ask MI6 to replace him on this assignment, and go back to London, or wherever MI6 would send him next. Before he'd arrived, he'd thought about Sören on the pole again, thought about Sören all hot and sweaty, and had to relieve himself, and as he pulled Sören's hair during Krav so Sören could work on the skill of getting free from a hair grab, his mind raced with fantasies of pulling on those curls during sex.

His attraction was more than sexual, of course - one of the things that he found he loved most about Sören was his willingness to try, his willingness to fight even though he was scared, the intense, fierce protectiveness Sören had towards the people he loved - but watching Sören move his body in Krav, feeling the strength and power of him, made Anthony's mind frequently dip into the gutter, wondering what Sören was like as a lover. If he was as aggressive in bed as he was sparring.

At last their Krav practice was over for the day, and now Anthony's lustful thoughts were pushed aside in favor of concern, as he watched Sören take some deep breaths, looking like the end of the day's Krav practice was the end of the world.

"So we're gonna run now, huh?" Sören frowned at him.

Even more than wanting to fuck him, Anthony wanted to hug Sören right then, wanted to assure him that it would all be OK. He hated that such a simple thing like running could give Sören so much anxiety, and he had a feeling as to why, one bullied kid recognizing another. Anthony wanted to talk to Sören about that, but he felt he would do Sören no favors taking him aside and giving him a talk, when his plans were centered on Sören going from Krav to running as quickly as possible, part of that endurance training.

Anthony nodded. "I live not far from Bondi Beach and I often run on the Coastal Walk. We'll be running from Bondi to Tamarama to start. Once you've been at it for a bit and

you've got more endurance we'll run from Bondi to Bronte, then eventually the whole way, out to Coogee."

If I get there, Sören broadcasted.

Anthony tried to appeal to Sören's sense of aesthetics, as an artist. "Hey, at least you get to see the ocean. It's a really scenic trail, you'll like it. It's part of what motivates me to run every day, going out and looking at the water."

Sören nodded, and Anthony felt Sören's reserve budge slightly, though only just so. Anthony walked them out to the carport, where his Audi was parked, and they rode in silence. Since parking was limited at Bondi Beach, Anthony had planned on parking at his usual space at the apartment complex where he lived, and then they'd walk to the trail, and when it was all done they'd walk back and Anthony would drive Sören home.

It was an overcast day in June, and not the best weather for beach aficionados, but Anthony liked the ocean rain or shine - indeed, Anthony thought there was a certain beauty to the way the ocean looked on grey days, and in the rain. It was also cooler today, as the Australian winter was about to start soon, so they wouldn't melt in the heat; Anthony remembered when he was new to Australia, trying to run in December, January, February, in the Sydney summer heat. It was better to get Sören started now, so he'd have less of a hard time keeping it up later in the year when summer was back.

As Anthony drove to the complex, he kept his eyes on the road, and the sky, but every now and again he stole glances at Sören, silent and brooding. His face burned, feeling like a lovesick teenager with a stupid crush, not wanting to be compelled to look at him so much, but he couldn't help himself. And the more he looked at Sören, the more that ache intensified - not just to be with him, but also, Anthony wanted to make him happy. He knew Sören had been through a lot, he could feel the sadness, and he longed to give Sören some kind of relief. He hoped that somehow, Sören running and getting some self-confidence would lift his spirits at least a little.

Once they were at the apartment complex parking lot, and Anthony parked, Sören got out and took a deep breath, shoulders heaving. Anthony came around and patted him before he led the way. As he glanced over at Sören, the somber look intensified - now Sören looked like he was on a death march instead of just walking from the complex over to Bondi.

Anthony couldn't take it anymore; he had to lighten the mood at least a little. "I've never seen someone that sad going to the beach before."

"You don't really know Mag - ah, Marcus."

Anthony's eyebrow raised at that. No, he did not know much about "Marcus Lauer" at all, except that Marcus was not human and very old. Anthony wondered about the slip to "Mag", if that was a fragment of a real name, or at least a name Marcus acceded to more privately. Even though it was his job to know things, Anthony had hesitated poking the mystery of "Marcus Lauer" - the Americans hadn't been able to get much out of him during the 1970s, and they had been very forceful in their methods; Anthony didn't think there was much use trying, even if he asked nicely. Marcus would either volunteer information to him or he wouldn't, and in the end, it didn't matter so much what Marcus was, or where he came from, that it mattered that the rest of the world didn't know what Marcus was, or where he came from. As it was, Anthony could barely handle knowing what little he knew about Sören's family, he didn't want to get himself even more entangled. He was starting to have a better appreciation for the concept of "going mad

from the revelation".

Somehow, the reference to Marcus being sad going to the beach struck Anthony as part of the package of weird shit, but he didn't press it, he just nodded and continued walking.

"So..." Sören's brow furrowed. "How far are we running?"

"To Tamarama and back. Tamarama is just over a kilometer, about a fifteen-minute walk one way. An easy beginner's run." Anthony smiled encouragingly. "Like I said back at your house, one of these days when you're ready, we'll run all the way from Bondi to Coogee, which is six kilometers one way, two to three hours to walk, less time to run."

"I doubt I can even make it a kilometer, never mind six."

"A wise man once said, 'The journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step.'" Anthony felt cheesy as hell for repeating that platitude, but it seemed appropriate here.

Sören cocked his head to one side. "How do you know it was a man who said that? Maybe it was a woman. Or a non-binary person."

Anthony couldn't help laughing, tickled by that. "Don't change, Sören."

God, I love him.

Anthony swallowed hard, feeling that ache again, resisting that urge to take Sören into his arms, kiss him passionately. The thought of making love to Sören on the beach... a beautiful setting for a beautiful man with a beautiful soul...

Dammit, focus. You're here to fucking run, not moon over him like an overgrown teenager.

"We're going to stretch first," Anthony said. Though walking from his complex's parking lot to the trail was a good warmup, it was still important to do some stretching exercises, especially with this being Sören's first run, Anthony didn't want Sören to get a charley horse or worse, a sprain or a strain. Anthony demonstrated stretches and then Sören followed, doing what Anthony was doing.

At last they got in position to run, with Anthony again showing Sören the correct stance. "Go," he said, and tore off. Sören was fast, but Anthony was faster, and Anthony found himself slowing so he wasn't meters ahead of Sören. Sören gave him a look as he caught up, and Anthony could feel the sharp edge of *don't you fucking pity me* behind it, but then his expression softened as he trotted alongside Anthony. Anthony's eyes moved from the trail, to the sea, to glancing over at Sören. Already Sören was breathing harder and looked a little uncomfortable, but he kept up the pace, and Anthony was proud of him for trying.

"You're doing good," Anthony encouraged.

Sören nodded.

When they were two thirds of the way to Tamarama, Sören slowed down and suddenly stopped, panting, and for a moment Anthony worried that maybe Sören had a charley horse or an injury, but then as Anthony stopped, Sören grabbed the tail of Anthony's shirt and moved him closer to the trail's edge, pointing out at the ocean. "Look!"

The tail of a humpback whale was breaching in the distance, and then it ducked back

underneath the waves. Anthony thought that would be all, but something told him to wait, and as he breathed in the salt air he began to feel it, the enormous presence out in the waters. Two humpback whales leapt out of the waves then, huge and majestic, their breach like a choreographed dance. Sören's eyes widened and his face lit up, and Sören let out an adorable little squeak, clapping as the whales turned and dove back down.

"Oh my god." Sören's voice was hushed, reverent as he blinked back tears. "I haven't seen whales since I was in Iceland."

"I've never seen them," Anthony admitted. "All this time in Australia, and all my years in a sub, and this is the first time I've seen whales up close."

"*Really.*" Sören gave him a sympathetic look.

Anthony nodded solemnly, then he looked back out at the sea to see if there would be more whale breaching, but it went quiet again. "That was absolutely magical." As he said it, a frisson went down his spine. Though he'd seen some strange things over the years, there was much he still retained a sense of skepticism about; he had a hard time believing in the concept of fate or destiny. And yet, it felt like he was somehow meant to share this moment with Sören, and, even more strangely, it felt like Sören had some sort of power above and beyond what he'd learned to call "the Force"... it felt like being around Sören was some sort of magic, and, strangest of all, like he and Sören had some sort of power or magic together, two parts of a greater whole.

That thought terrified him, both because it sounded crazy, and because it sounded true, all at once.

Enough of that crazy shit.

They continued running, and at last they reached their destination. "So this is Bananarama?" Sören asked.

Anthony laughed, tickled by that. "Tamarama. Although, the locals call this place Glamarama because 'the beautiful people' tend to come here to sunbathe. Some of them topless." Anthony gestured at the narrow beach, which was largely empty. "Not today on a day like this, of course."

Sören raised an eyebrow, lips quirked with amusement. "So do you?"

"Sunbathe?" Anthony snorted. "I'm bloody English."

Then Anthony knew he'd walked into it. Sören's smirk became a grin as he said, "Hi Bloody English -"

"Goddammit, Sören." But Anthony chuckled, and Sören laughed too. Then Anthony realized Sören was asking him if he sunbathed, even though Sören knew perfectly well from the look of him that he did not, because Anthony had mentioned "the beautiful people" frequenting Tamarama and it was Sören's way of flirting. Anthony's face was on fire and he swallowed hard, stomach fluttering. *God, I want you.*

"Jæja, we don't exactly get a lot of sun either, where I'm from. Well... not during the winter, anyway. We have the midnight sun this time of year." Sören sighed then, and Anthony could feel how much Sören missed Iceland, how much he ached for it, feeling like a piece of his soul was ripped out. Sören broadcasted mental images of the midnight sun, the "white nights", that numinous, magical feeling they carried... Then Sören looked

out at the sea, the glint of golden sunlight peeking through silver clouds, the water sparkling like diamonds. "Anyway, not really optimal sunbathing conditions. I'm about as pale as you are."

Anthony couldn't resist. "Hi About As Pale As You Are -"

Sören shot him a look, then he playfully elbowed Anthony, laughing. Anthony once again fought the urge to pull Sören into a kiss, even as he could feel how much Sören wanted that, too. Their eyes met before Sören looked around, taking it all in - the rocks, the sand, the waves. Anthony could feel Sören wanting to go into the ocean, something he hadn't done in a long time. As Sören reached for the hem of his shirt, about to take it off, Anthony said, "I wouldn't do that if I were you."

I can't believe I'm telling him not *to take his clothes off.*

Sören paused, looking confused.

"No swimming," Anthony said.

"Don't tell me it's too fucking cold. You do realize where I'm from -"

"It's not that." Anthony gestured at the waves. "Everything out here is rip. There's a club dedicated to rescuing people from the waves out here, it's that bad."

"Oh." Sören sighed, and then broadcasted another mental image: a younger Sören, trying to swim somewhere else, getting caught in the undertow... Sören calling out *Alejandro!* as he was pulled into the strong current. Marcus having to rescue him, pulling him to shore.

As much as Anthony didn't want to reveal that he could see that, feeling like he was spying without meaning to, his curiosity got the better of him. "What happened?"

"Brazil," Sören said. "I visited with... Marcus. Well, Alejandro, back then." Sören sighed again and closed his eyes, a pained look on his face. When he opened his eyes they were far away. "Prainha Beach is pretty legendary for its rip. I was an idiot. I almost drowned, then I got sick. Walking pneumonia." *And he left, once I was better.*

Anthony cringed at that broadcast - he also found himself getting angry in Marcus's general direction, even though Marcus obviously came back - and then Sören realized he'd heard that and said, "Yeah," under his breath, looking down at his shoes.

Anthony found himself putting a hand on Sören's shoulder, just that little touch like fire. The urge to kiss him intensified. Anthony's hand moved down to take Sören's hand instead, and squeezed.

"I didn't know at the time that he, you know. Freaked out because my brush with death reminded him I could die." Sören's voice lowered, even though there was hardly anybody around. "The perils of an immortal being involved with a mortal. Even after I found out *what* he was, and *why* things happened the way they did, I didn't really understand it until more recently. Whoever said 'better to have loved and lost than never loved at all' wasn't fucking immortal. They don't know what it's like to have the people you love become ghosts inside you." Sören broadcasted then how much he missed his brother - how he was starting to consider finding Dag a lost cause, and grieving for him - and the pain over someday losing other people he loved. Margrét. Ari. Frankie. The mental image of Frankie going up in flames, Sören waking up screaming from a nightmare.

Sören gave him a pointed look then, and when Sören turned back to the sea he glared, like the sea had personally offended him.

And there it was. That was why Sören was holding back on his end. Anthony felt a shiver go through him, as Sören looked out at the sea - ancient, infinite - and Sören broadcasted mental images of what he knew of Marcus's memories, burying lovers, weeping, walking the world over the ages, always ending up alone, looking at the sea as they were now.

Anthony's own hesitation with getting involved with Sören was mixing business with pleasure, being afraid that his feelings would end up making him compromise his duties. But this was above and beyond that, Sören fearing the pain of loss, when he'd already endured enough suffering in his life and he was preparing to suffer even more as the years wore on and those he loved aged and withered and died while he remained. Anthony couldn't imagine what that existence must be like, and he felt for Sören. He knew that whatever assurances he could make of not leaving him, not abandoning him as Marcus had once done... they meant nothing because he was mortal and eventually he *would* leave Sören's life.

The silence hung between them as heavy as the clouds. Sören picked up a pebble and tossed it into the water, and Anthony watched the waves take it, rip it away as fast as their run.

Anthony felt like his feelings for Sören were like that pebble, in that tide. Already he was attached, being dragged further and further. His only hope of salvation was to not cross that line.

"You ready to run back?" Sören cocked his head to one side, hands on hips, leaning back a little, trying to look nonchalant even as Anthony knew, felt, that the mood was anything but casual here and now.

Anthony needed something to lighten that mood, or he would start to cry. He racked his brain for a minute and then remembered something very nearby that Sören probably hadn't seen yet and would enjoy. "Let's take a little detour, OK?"

Off the trail, on a clifftop, there was a two thousand year old Aboriginal carving. Sören and Anthony walked around it, as it was very large. "It looks like a giant fish," Sören said.

Anthony nodded. "People around here say it's a whale, but..." He pointed up towards the head, with noticeable gills. "Whales don't have gills. Looks more like a shark."

Sören grinned. "Well, now I can say that's my first time seeing a shark." Sören attempted to wink, and failed, a clumsy blink that Anthony still found endearing. "I guess you took my shark cherry."

Anthony laughed so hard his sides hurt, his face on fire. For someone who had sent a strong hint about having feelings but not wanting to act on them because of the immortal/mortal divide, Sören was still obviously flirting with him, and Anthony loved it, stomach fluttering as he instinctively preened, smoothing his sweat-damp hair. "I guess so."

Their eyes met, and held, before Sören looked out to sea again.

"Come on," Anthony said, gesturing to the trail. "Let's run back."

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By the time the run was over, Sören was completely out of breath, and there was a panicked look on his face, but then his breathing slowed, though he looked ready to drop on the walk from the trail out to Anthony's apartment complex. Enough so that Anthony felt a little worried for him, and decided to not drive him home right away.

"Do you want to stop at my place for a bit, get something to drink?" Anthony asked.

Sören nodded vehemently.

Anthony's flat was on the second floor, and Anthony felt a tad guilty about making Sören go up a flight of stairs but it was better than being up towards the top of the high-rise. By the time they reached the top of the stairs Sören was out of breath, and moreso when they went down the hall to the door of Anthony's apartment. Anthony took the keys out of his pocket and watched as Sören leaned against the wall while he unlocked the door.

Craig was right there and began to circle at Anthony's feet, whining like Anthony had been gone for days instead of mere hours. Anthony stooped to pet the Siamese, and Sören let out an adorable squeak at the sight of the cat.

Sören's face lit up. "Oh, wow, what a pretty kitty. You showed me pictures but he's even prettier in person."

Craig came over to sniff Sören, and allowed himself to be petted. "Hi pretty baby," Sören cooed. "*Svo ljúft lítið barn. Þvílík yndisleg lítil kisubarn...*"

Anthony knew Sören really liked cats, having three of them, but nonetheless, he was surprised and delighted by Sören's reaction. He especially loved the sound of Sören lapsing into his native language, and his heart skipped a beat, stomach fluttering again. He gestured towards the living room, which was open plan with the kitchen. "Have a seat and I'll wait on you," Anthony said.

There was a loveseat and an armchair in the living room, with a glass-top black coffee table between them. Sören took a seat in the armchair, and propped his feet up on the ottoman. Craig came over and got right on Sören's lap, and Anthony watched Sören stroke the cat for a moment before he opened the refrigerator. "I have water, Gatorade, juice... kombucha..."

Sören snorted at the kombucha. *Hipster,* Sören broadcasted. "Gatorade, *takk*, if it's cold."

Anthony took out two, one for Sören, one for himself, since he knew he'd lost electrolytes between Krav and the run. He sat down in the armchair and noticed Sören looking around, and felt a pang of self-consciousness. While his apartment complex was upscale, with high rents for living in such close proximity to Bondi Beach, Anthony's own flat was very basic. He'd been living here since December and hadn't really done much to decorate. The walls were all white, and the coffee table, TV stand and bookshelves on either side of the TV were black to match the black counter in the kitchen, and the dark hardwood floors. Anthony's flat was a one-bedroom, and his bedroom carried the same white-and-black scheme. Anthony knew his apartment didn't really look *lived* in, and he didn't have a whole lot of personal possessions - though he was an avid bibliophile, he kept his books down to one narrow three-story bookshelf, and the other bookshelf held CDs and DVDs. Some of his living so minimally was by virtue of moving around so much

over the last twenty years, and not wanting the hassle of having to pack up a lot of things and leave on a moment's notice. And some of his living minimally was by design, to look as generic and nonthreatening as possible, nothing noteworthy, since he had learned to "blend in" first as a Force user, then later from his years with the Special Boat Service, then MI6. He really wanted some art to spiff the place up - especially a commission or two from Sören - but in the meantime, his place was bland, and now Sören was seeing how bland his place was and Anthony could feel Sören's touch of sadness.

"I don't entertain much," Anthony said.

"I got that," Sören said, nodding. He opened his Gatorade and took a big gulp. "I mean, I wasn't exactly living in high style in Reykjavik or London, either. Well, when I was on my own, anyway." Sören broadcasted a mental image of living in a penthouse flat with "Alejandro" in Reykjavik - a moment of he and "Alejandro" on the rooftop, watching the sunset together on a winter afternoon - and later, Sören sharing a house with Dooku in the greater London area.

Then Sören's attention turned back to the cat, who was purring away. "But I guess kitty doesn't mind, do you?"

Craig had a cat tree and scratching post by the window, which led out to the balcony and had a great view of Bondi. Craig also had a cat hammock in Anthony's bedroom window as well as a very plush cat bed by Anthony's bed, though Craig usually slept on the bed with Anthony. Craig was giving Anthony an expectant look now, like he was waiting for food or treats, even though Craig had plenty of food in his bowl. "He's spoiled," Anthony said.

"Does he have a name?"

"Craig."

Sören cocked his head to one side, looking like he was racking his brain. "Craig..." Sören muttered that name under his breath, and stroked his beard for a moment before resuming petting the cat. "Huh. I don't know why, but I'm getting a sense of, ah, what's that called... déjà vu."

Anthony also found that curious.

Sören sipped his Gatorade some more, and then he frowned. "So we're off the hook for shooting tomorrow since it's Kenny's birthday, right?"

"Correct."

"But we're still running."

Anthony nodded. "Like I told you, this is an everyday thing."

Sören's frown deepened. He sipped his Gatorade and said, "Fuck."

Anthony also frowned. He thought it was important that Sören condition his body to be able to hold his own against threats, but he didn't want to torture the poor man. "Was it that bad? You survived. You made the entire course from Bondi to Tamarama and back. Yes, you were really out of breath at the end, *but* -"

"So," Sören said, "I have asthma. Well, let me rephrase that. *Had* asthma, past tense."

Sören made a vague hand gesture. "Ingmar gave me immortality with his blood, and when that happened, my asthma went away. As bad as it was out there on the trail, it would have been worse before. I would have needed my inhaler. I possibly would have needed a trip to the emergency room."

"Jesus."

Sören nodded. He sipped and went on. "When I was a kid, I didn't just get bullied at home by my uncle Einar and aunt Katrín, who were alcoholics, but I got picked on in school, too. I was kind of a runt -"

"You'd never know that now." Anthony was surprised; Sören was six feet tall barefoot. Anthony was still two inches taller.

"No, but until I hit that growth spurt I was the shortest in my class. And I was kind of a, ah, what's that word... a klutz. I was also really smart, really nerdy. The only person nerdier than me was Dag. So between being a bookworm nerd, short, klutzy, and asthmatic, I wasn't exactly popular, and that really reared its ugly head when we had phys ed. I was always picked last for sports teams, and kids would gang up on me - throw balls at me, hit me with hockey sticks. That sort of thing." Sören looked down. "It's stupid, that something that happened over twenty years ago still chases me around, I'm an adult now, you'd think I'd be over being bullied -"

Anthony shook his head. "Most people don't realize how traumatic bullying actually is. But I do."

Sören looked up and their eyes met.

"So..." Anthony sighed. "I take it running for you was kind of trigger-y because it reminded you of when you had asthma attacks and got bullied for them."

Sören nodded solemnly. "It was something my ex Justin made fun of me about, too. I'd have asthma attacks when he stressed me out, and sometimes he'd take my inhaler away -"

"Bloody *hell.*" Anthony's eyes widened. "This was Justin Roberts, right? The dead Arsenal player?"

"Hailed as the next Beckham, that was him." Sören nodded again. “I... don't want to talk about him right now."

"Fair, sorry." Anthony wanted to go over to the armchair and give Sören a big hug, but he resisted. "Anyway, he was a piece of shit for mocking your asthma and taking your inhaler. Honestly, anyone who makes fun of you for having an asthma attack is a piece of shit. People should be more compassionate."

"They should be, but they're not." Their eyes met again.

"No, they're not." Anthony had seen some things during his time with the Royal Navy, and later during his time with MI6. Things that kept him up some nights, and gave him nightmares other nights. He'd seen the worst in humanity, and he'd put some of the monsters down like rabid dogs. But it didn't undo what they had done.

Sören stroked Craig more insistently, like petting the cat was some sort of ritual against evil. Anthony thought for a moment, wanting to choose his words carefully, and then he

said, "Look, Sören. If running upsets you that much, I won't force you. I don't want you to be triggered and upset. But I think you did well for your first time, and as time goes on it'll get easier. You'll be able to run longer distances, without being so winded -"

"I'll do it," Sören said. "I need to prove this to myself. I mean, if I can't run less than a kilometer without feeling like I'm gonna keel over, I probably won't be able to last very long if I'm fighting a god."

"So..." Anthony really didn't want to deal with this subject, even though he'd known for some time now that non-humans walked on Earth, and a lot of those silly folklore stories were actually not silly at all, but real; a shiver went through him as he remembered seeing the djinn in the Middle East. But that was one thing, gods were another. Anthony didn't believe in gods. Or at least, he didn't want to. He was starting to understand what the expression "mind blown" *really* meant, and it hurt. "You... are... going to be fighting a god, at some point."

"Gods, plural. That's what Ingmar was – Yngvi, Freyr - though I'm not fighting him specifically. Or I had better not be. He needs to just stay the fuck away from me." Sören broadcasted, *I need to figure out how to make him stay away, I don't trust him to leave well enough alone, and he* is *still family. There's been enough kinslaying.*

Anthony wondered about that, and kept silent. He was already falling down the rabbit hole, though it felt more like getting dragged into a riptide now. "Gods, plural."

"Gods, plural. I mean, a gun will help against garden-variety threats..."

"And Krav will, too. But neither of those things will really help against..." Anthony couldn't believe he was having this conversation. "A god."

"The Force might," Sören said.

Anthony considered. "I know that part of why I wanted to teach you Krav is so you could learn a form of self-defense that didn't involve you having to use the Force and potentially expose yourself in public, or at least to a non-zero number of witnesses, and then we have to go through all the trouble of cleaning it up and relocating you again. But maybe in addition to regular vanilla garden-variety Krav, we could also sometimes do Force-enhanced Krav training."

"So what, stuff like me trying to break free of you Force choking me?"

Anthony nodded. "And Force throws, and... yes. That sort of thing. We can trade off, regular Krav twice a week, enhanced Krav once a week."

"OK." Then Sören put down his Gatorade, covered his face with his hands, and made a noise before his hands slid down, a look on his face like a grumpy wet cat that was adorable and heartbreaking all at once. "I'm already sick of this shit, Anthony. I knew when I was a kid I'd never have a normal life, but I didn't think it would get like *this.*"

"Can I ask how you ended up in a position where you'd have to fight gods, in the first place?"

"It's... it's an ancient conflict involving my family. That's really all I can tell you right now."

Now Anthony had more questions than answers. Craig got off Sören's lap and went onto Anthony's lap with a "Prrrp?" Anthony stroked and skritched the cat, smiling a little at the

deep, loud purr.

"I mean..." Sören leaned back in the armchair and pinched the bridge of his nose. "I can do shit like this..." Sören waved his hand and the Gatorade floated towards him. "And yet it isn't *enough*. I feel so fucking powerless. Helpless. It's not just that running reminds me of my asthma which reminds me of getting bullied, but I... I'm gonna be thirty-seven in November and I'm *still* fucking getting bullied. There's no fucking escape. It's *bullshit*." With that, Sören broke down crying.

There was a box of tissues sitting on the coffee table, and Anthony used the Force to move the box across the room over to Sören. Sören took a wad of tissues with a mumbled *takk* and Sören floated the box back to the coffee table. Anthony watched Sören cry into the tissues, and now he felt helpless, wishing he could do something to *fix* Sören's life, or at least make Sören feel better for a little while.

Anthony let Sören cry, feeling almost as if he could cry himself, heart aching for him. After a few minutes Sören dabbed at his face again and then he said, "Can I use your restroom? Sometimes splashing water on my face helps -"

"Go ahead. It's not far." Anthony lived in a one-bedroom studio, there was a short hall leading to the bedroom, with just a bathroom and a hall closet.

Anthony sat and waited, petting Craig on his lap, while he heard Sören sobbing in the bathroom, heard the water running, and at last Sören's tears were calming down. But Anthony still *hurt* for him, and his instincts got the better of him and he found himself putting Craig down on the floor and walking gingerly to the hallway. He noticed Sören had come out of the bathroom and was surveying the bedroom, twitching his nose, as if to see whether or not it was some sort of bachelor "love pad" for his conquests. It was, in fact, a plain, ordinary bedroom, and Anthony had not had any conquests in awhile.

"Like I said, I don't entertain often," Anthony said, feeling awkward, hoping Sören got the meaning behind that. "No one shares that bed." *Just you, if you want it.* But he knew that was too dangerous.

"Your room could use some art," Sören said, looking back at Anthony.

"It could. And you could use a hug." Anthony held out his arms.

It was playing with fire - Anthony's cock stirred the moment Sören's body was against his - but Sören did really need that hug, and Anthony needed to hug him. Anthony's arms tightened around him and he rocked Sören for a moment. Sören rested his head on Anthony's shoulder and it felt incredibly *right*, like Sören's body was made to fit with his this way, but right now he just needed to comfort Sören, no sex, no strings. Just compassion. Just warmth.

With his arm around Sören's waist, Anthony gently led him back to the living room. This time he had Sören sit next to him on the loveseat. Anthony grabbed the remote for his stereo and put it on, thinking background music would help soothe Sören a little. It was Coltrane; Anthony hoped Sören liked jazz. Even though Anthony didn't have guests over, and preferred to keep his possessions light for ease of travel, he had still splurged on surround sound, since he enjoyed listening to music when he was at home.

"That's nice, that's Coltrane?" Sören cocked his head to one side.

Anthony nodded.

"Mag, ah, Marcus. Likes jazz."

That explained how Sören got into it. Once again that slip of "Mag-something." Anthony tried to not dwell on the curiosity.

Then Sören started to cry a little again. "Jesus," Sören choked out. "I'm sorry." Anthony could feel the shame radiating from Sören - even as he had love and support in his life now, the damage from the past had taken its toll and Sören still got down on himself for things like crying and appearing "weak". "I come over your place and I start crying like this -"

"Sören, it's all right." Anthony gave him a stern look, not wanting Sören to feel bad about feeling bad. "I don't want you to feel bad about yourself. You have nothing to be ashamed of." Anthony exhaled sharply. "I get it."

Sören raised an eyebrow, giving Anthony an incredulous look through his tears.

Anthony nodded slowly. "I went to public school. Like you, I was a bookworm. A nerd. At the head of my class." Anthony gave a bitter little laugh. "I was also a mummy's boy. I got called gay before I knew what that even was, or that I was."

"I'm not saying you're lying, but I find it... hard to believe that you were bullied," Sören said. "You're so... suave."

Anthony laughed again and shook his head. "You say that because you know me now. When I was younger I had a stutter. I have glasses, which I wear when I don't have my contacts in, I got called 'four eyes'. Kids used to break my glasses for the fun of it."

"God. Kids are fucking awful."

"It gets worse." Anthony hadn't told anyone else this story before. "When I was twelve, I was beat up by a group of boys. After enough punches and kicks, I rolled away from them and started to run, except I couldn't outrun them. So I climbed a tree. And I fell out of the tree. Broke my femur."

Sören let out a low whistle, eyes wide. "You're lucky you didn't break your neck."

"So I've been told."

"Your... your femur. That's a pretty serious break, já?"

"Yes. I had to have a metal plate in my left thigh; I have a scar there."

Anthony could feel Sören's curiosity about the scar, and then Sören's curiosity about what he looked like naked. Anthony fought the urge to show him. Sören finished his Gatorade and sat stunned.

"And you weren't disqualified from the service?" Sören asked.

Anthony shook his head. "I recovered pretty well. Plus, that fall was a bit of a wakeup call for me. I spent some time trying to... well, I wouldn't say 'get normal', but I worked on the things I had some control over, like practicing my speech to get rid of my stutter... and I started working out. I begged my mum and dad to let me take jiu jitsu. I wanted to make sure that the next person who fucked with me would consider it the worst mistake of their

life."

"I guess so. And I guess you're eminently qualified to help me, ah... become more bully-proof."

"I'll do my best," Anthony said. "If there's one thing I can't fucking stand, it's bullying. It's a big motivator for why I went into the service. This was before 9/11, but the narrative of the first Gulf War was strong, my uncle died in the first Gulf War, as a hero, sacrificing himself to save his squad. And my grandfather fought against the Nazis. So I went in the Royal Navy as soon as I was done with Cambridge. I thought I was doing the right thing, wanting to be part of a greater whole that protected the United Kingdom, and the free world at large."

"You sound a bit disillusioned."

"I am," Anthony admitted. "It's not the fault of the people I served with, honorable women and men, many of whom went into the Royal Navy for the same reason I did. Just the same, I might have taken a different path if I knew then what I learnt over the years." Anthony sighed.

"What do you think you would have done?"

"Archaeologist, maybe. I majored in linguistics and archaeology was my minor, I probably would have pursued graduate studies in archaeology. Though my mum says I should have become a barrister. As if I argue or lecture too much."

Sören snorted. "I'm inclined to agree with her, considering you've got me to run."

Anthony chuckled. Then Anthony looked over at his bookshelf and waved his hand, using the Force to pull over one book in particular - a photo album. He opened it and held it between them so Sören could look at the pictures. Anthony pointed to a picture of himself when he was twelve. "There. That was me."

Sören laughed softly - not at him, but with him. "I should show you myself at that age sometime."

There were awkward pictures of Anthony's teenage years - even though Anthony had worked on trying to make himself less awkward, he was still a dork and it showed, especially a picture of Anthony's first concert, and incidentally also his first experience with drinking, getting his late uncle's partner to buy him beer at an Oasis concert. Anthony was very obviously drunk in the picture, making a face in the camera, and Sören giggled.

"I wish we could have been friends as teenagers," Sören said. "Though you're a little older, so I'd probably have been kind of a pest, a little kid tagging along, idolizing you."

Anthony thought that was actually kind of adorable. "I would have protected you from the bullies."

Sören smiled.

Anthony patted him, and wished he hadn't touched Sören, once again feeling that tingle of fire through him, wanting to do more than just pat him. Anthony flipped through to pictures of when he was newly in the Royal Navy, and then pictures from later in his twenties and his early thirties, in uniform. Anthony was also wearing wire-rimmed glasses in most of those pictures.

Sören wolf whistled. "Hello, sailor." Then Sören clapped a hand over his mouth, turning beetroot. "Er," Sören said through his hand.

Anthony laughed. He was flattered rather than offended - and also irritated that they were both in this stalemate, both mutually unwilling to do anything about that attraction.

"So you, ah." Sören crinkled his nose and bit his lower lip. "Commanded a sub."

Those words were dripping with innuendo, and Anthony's cock stirred again - now the urge he was fighting was to pick Sören up off the couch, carry him to the bedroom, tie him up and tease him. He held that urge in check, and made himself think of the regular, non-innuendo meaning. "I did. I got as far as captain rank in the Royal Navy before MI6 headhunted me."

"That's really... interesting." Their eyes met, then Sören looked back at the pictures of Anthony in his uniform. "I've never been on a submarine, let alone lived on one."

"It was an experience," Anthony said, nodding. "One you couldn't pay me to repeat, though it's been a bit difficult to get adjusted to, well, I won't say civilian life since MI6 aren't quite civilians, but you get what I mean."

"Not just civilian life, but life on land, I imagine."

Feeling like he needed to make Sören laugh, Anthony began singing a song from a movie from his childhood - "Under the Sea" from *The Little Mermaid*.

The seaweed is always greener
In somebody else's lake
You dream about going up there
But that is a big mistake
Just look at the world around you
Right here on the ocean floor
Such wonderful things surround you
What more is you lookin' for?

Under the sea
Under the sea
Darling it's better
Down where it's wetter
Take it from me

At that moment, Craig hopped on the coffee table, stepping on the remote, which changed the music on the stereo from Anthony's Coltrane CD to one of Sydney's radio stations. The stereo began blaring Cardi B:

Yeah, you fucking with some wet ass pussy
Bring a bucket and a mop for this wet ass pussy
Give me everything you got for this wet ass pussy

Anthony's jaw dropped; he wanted to crawl under the couch and die. Craig slow blinked, giving Anthony a sweet, innocent face that wasn't innocent at all while Sören doubled over, howling, wheezing.

Anthony facepalmed and shook his head, making noises.

"I guess it was really wet?" Sören quipped.

"And this, my friend, is why you shouldn't feel awkward about being upset and crying in front of me, because it will never be more awkward than this moment right now." Anthony rolled his eyes, and then glared at the cat, who just yawned.

Chapter 23

It was Tuesday, June fifteenth - Kenny's fortieth birthday. Sören had talked Kenny into having a party at Build-A-Bear. Besides Kenny, Ali, and their kids, Sören, Maglor, Anthony, Frankie and Margrét were all attending. Dooku had been invited, but opted to stay home and look after the babies - Ali got the sense Build-A-Bear offended Dooku's sense of dignity - though Dooku would be joining them at a restaurant afterwards for dinner.

Metallica and Megadeth were of course thrilled that the party was at Build-A-Bear, and everyone would get to build their own stuffed animal; the party was pre-paid and the package deal came with a choice of outfit besides a soft toy. Ali was amused, but also secretly delighted to see everyone indulging their inner children - especially Maglor, who was thousands of years old, though Maglor looked a bit annoyed when a bear-eared party hat was placed on his head. Ali flashed him a grin and Maglor glared at her, and somehow the party hat did nothing to make that glare less devastatingly sexy.

Everyone looked ridiculous in their party hats, though Margrét had a certain glamorous poise to her even with the bear-ears party hat on her head. She still, however, looked very out-of-place in Build-A-Bear in a black and violet gothic lolita getup that matched her long purple hair, and since they hadn't reserved the Build-A-Bear for the party and there were other customers shopping, every now and again Margrét got strange looks. She took it in stride, giving a demure little Disney Princess wave. Finally a girl who looked to be about Metallica and Megadeth's age, with blonde pigtails, wearing a pink T-shirt with denim overalls, wandered over and told Margrét, "You're really pretty. Are you a fairy godmother?"

Margrét laughed and made a "shhh" gesture with her finger to her lips, looking around the store and then back at the girl with a mischievous little smile.

"I'm sorry," said the woman with her, also blonde, short, looking apologetic, putting an arm around the girl and drawing her back.

"No need to apologize," Margrét said, her smile broadening.

"OK. Well in that case, you have amazing hair," the woman said, grinning. "I love your dress, too."

"Thank you! I made it," Margrét said proudly.

The woman blinked in seeming disbelief. "That's fantastic work. Do you have a shop? Do you take commissions?"

"I don't have a shop but I could probably be persuaded to take commissions," Margrét said. With a glance at Frankie, Margrét got up and walked over to the woman and the little girl, with the little girl looking up at her with worshipful eyes as Margrét and the woman discussed some particulars and traded contact info. Frankie glared in their direction, and Ali realized Frankie was still feeling sensitive about being abandoned by Flóki - not that Ali could blame her - and saw the woman as a potential threat, possible competition for Margrét, even though Ali didn't get the sense Margrét was attracted to the woman, was only interested in making a new friend.

Ali envied that ability in Margrét, the warmth and openness around others. Ali had heard

Margrét used to run a bar in Reykjavik, and gathered it must have been pretty popular; Ali could see those same people skills put in action now. It didn't come across to Ali like flirting, but Ali supposed Frankie was in a state where everything looked suspect, and it didn't help that things were still rocky between Frankie and Margrét following Flóki's departure; Ali had heard from Sören that Frankie and Margrét were sleeping in separate rooms now, acting more like roommates than wives.

It made Ali sad, and she really hoped Frankie and Margrét weren't going to have a row on Kenny's birthday.

Meanwhile, Sören and Anthony were flirting enough for an entire village, eye-fucking each other, little touches here and there, Anthony's cheeks turning pink, Sören doing that nose-wrinkle-lip-biting thing that Ali noticed Sören did when he was flirting. Ali half-expected to see little pink hearts floating above them as they made their way around the store, browsing.

Kenny noticed it too, glancing at them then rolling his eyes at Ali before reaching out to give her a little squeeze. Ali hugged him back, and tapped the bear ears on his head. "Feel any older yet?"

"*God.*"

Margrét came back over to Frankie and gave her a long hug, as if she knew Frankie was uncomfortable - Ali was guessing Margrét *did* know, since she could feel it too - and Frankie relaxed a little. Then Margrét took Frankie's hand and dragged her over to look at the selection of stuffed animals to build. The party package included one toy for everyone, but now Margrét was telling Frankie, "Here, if you pick out a friend for your new friend, I'll pay." Frankie smiled at her, and Ali breathed a sigh of relief.

Good. Make up, you muppets. Ali looked over at Megadeth and Metallica, who were with their party coordinator debating the finer merits of the stegosaurus versus the brachiosaurus - Ali was surprised the six-year-olds could even pronounce those words at their age, but then, the twins were obsessed with dinosaurs - and then she looked back over at Sören and Anthony. Anthony picked up a shark, examining it carefully. "Maybe you can take him with us to Tamarama, so he can see the carving," Sören said. Anthony chuckled at that. Then Sören took the shark and made it chase the rainbow-colored bunny Sören was holding. "Oh no!" Sören said in a high-pitched voice, as he made the bunny hop across the shelf. "He's gonna eat me!"

Sören moved the shark's head and said in a deeper voice, "I just want hugs!"

"Those two need adult supervision," Ali said, and Kenny nodded. They wandered over to Sören and Anthony, with Kenny whistling innocently. Sören raised an eyebrow as they approached.

"Having fun yet?" Kenny asked.

"Mhm," Sören said. "Look at my fabulous bunny. I think that's what I'm going to name him. Fabulous." Then he glared at Kenny. "Why haven't you picked something out yet?"

"I'm getting around to it," Kenny said. He watched as Ali pulled a rainbow-print-on-white owl down from the shelf; Ali liked owls. Kenny looked at Ali's owl, then over at Metallica's stegosaurus and Megadeth's brachiosaurus. "Wow, dinosaurs. Why am I not surprised."

Sören sighed. "Man, I wish Harrison could have come out for this. He really loves

dinosaurs." Sören cackled. "Maybe we can take him when they come in July, I can get him a dinosaur as a belated birthday present." Sören laughed harder. "I can tease him about getting old."

"How old is he?" It hadn't occurred to Ali to ask before now.

"Twenty-nine."

Kenny and Anthony both glared at Sören, who grinned before he picked up a white bear off the shelf and moved the bear's head as he spoke in an imitation of Dooku's basso, "As you know, twenty-nine isn't old." Then Sören put the bear back on the shelf.

The kids got some of their dinosaur obsession from Kenny, who now picked up a tan triceratops, smiling at it. "Awwww, he's cute," Ali said. "He'll be cuter once he's stuffed."

"What makes you assume it's a he?" Kenny asked, and then he grinned as he said, "Nah, it's a boy. His name is Jake."

Ali giggled, snorting. "Jake. OK."

Frankie and Margrét were coming by now - Margrét pointed at something on a higher shelf, Ali noticed Margrét was pointing at a rainbow llama; Frankie's face lit up and Margrét took the llama down and handed it to Frankie, who was already carrying a pink llama with a sparkly neck, horns and hooves.

"You're getting two?" Sören asked.

Frankie nodded.

"Well..." Sören looked at the bunny. "He should have a friend, too." Sören looked around, stroking his chin with his free hand, and then he decided on a cat with pastel blue, pink and lavender swirls. "There."

Margrét picked out a more traditional-looking black bear for herself. "That's so boring," Sören teased her. "Cute, but boring."

"He won't be boring when I'm done with him," Margrét promised.

Sören looked around. "I should get Nico something, since he's not here and all. Now, what would he like..." Sören's eyes locked on the selection of cats. "He likes cats." Sören picked out a tuxedo cat for Dooku, which made Ali smile.

Everyone now had a stuffed toy picked out but Maglor, who was still sitting. Ali and Kenny looked at each other and then they marched over to Maglor, dragged him up, and brought him over to the toy selection. "Pick something out," Kenny said. "That is the rule."

Maglor raised his eyebrows at Kenny, but looked more amused than annoyed. Ali wondered why Maglor had been hanging back, and then she realized it, feeling past the strong shield wall Maglor habitually kept around his mind. Seeing parents here with their kids was reminding Maglor of not being there for his own son's childhood, and the way his son was shunted off into another universe to punish Maglor for preferring to keep company with humans. Ali wanted to hug him tight, but she also didn't want to make an emotional scene here in public, so instead she quietly reached for Maglor's hand and squeezed hard.

Sören also seemed to sense Maglor's discomfort, and reached out to touch his arm. "Hey," Sören said. "You need a friend too." Sören's and Maglor's eyes met.

Maglor nodded and said, "It's just... different. My childhood was a long time ago. Nothing like this was around back then." Maglor broadcasted a mental image of his childhood in Valinor, and the way Fëanor made things for him and Maedhros, but Maglor also spent a lot of his childhood outdoors, or practicing on the harp. And that too was giving Maglor a touch of wistfulness, when life was innocent and uncomplicated, carefree days before the Doom.

Ali felt it too, and she knew from the sudden look of pain on Sören's face that he felt it as well. Ali imagined it had to be even more intense for Sören, remembering his life as Fëanor, raising seven boys, trying to give them the happy childhood that he didn't have raised by Finwë - Ali had the glimmer of a memory of Maedhros hearing about Finwë's cruelty when he was old enough, but even before that, Ali remembered that as a child Maedhros had known something was seriously *off* when Finwë was visiting, there wasn't the warmth between Finwë and his father that Fëanor had for so many others.

Sören looked about ready to cry, but then he looked at Kenny, as if to remind himself this was Kenny's birthday and he didn't want to ruin it by having a meltdown, and then he looked back at Maglor. "You want some help picking something out?" Sören asked. Glancing around at the customers, Sören said, "Pretend I'm your father and I'm giving you a stuffed animal..."

Maglor chuckled, and Ali snorted - of course, there was no pretending involved, Sören *was* Maglor's father, eons ago, but he couldn't very well say that out in public. Maglor took Sören's arm and Ali watched as they looked around, and at last Sören took down a unicorn, purple with a rainbow mane and rainbow hair above glittery hooves, which matched a glittery horn. "You should have a unicorn," Sören said, "since you're a cryptid and all."

Maglor facepalmed, laughing harder. He accepted the unicorn and kissed Sören's cheek. Sören touched Maglor's face, brown eyes soft, and then Maglor led them to sit back down.

The stuffed animals weren't stuffed yet, which was the next phase of the party, putting the stuffing inside the toys. The party coordinator, who was being a good sport even as Ali could tell she thought it was a little weird that adults were having a Build-A-Bear Party, passed out little hearts, two for each person.

"Now, you're going to take your hearts, and make a wish," the coordinator said.

Anthony raised an eyebrow, and Sören gave him a stern look that said *make a damn wish* before turning his head back, giving a little throat clear before he closed his eyes and squeezed the hearts tight in his fists. Ali and Kenny looked at each other then did the same. Even though it was just a silly game, Ali nonetheless made a wish in earnest: *Let us all be together again, someday.*

One of the hearts was to go inside each person's toy along with the stuffing, and the other heart would go inside Kenny's triceratops, so his triceratops got a heart from everyone. "Everyone's wish is in Jake," Kenny said with a smile when the hearts were placed inside.

"Jake is magic," Sören said, nodding solemnly.

After the toys were sewn up, they each got an air bath, and then it was time to select outfits. Ali picked out rainbow leggings and a pink hoodie with a rainbow heart on it, and

rainbow hi-top sneakers, for her owl. Kenny picked a pirate costume for his triceratops, which made Ali crack up laughing, snorting and wheezing as Kenny moved Jake's head around and said, "Arrrr, maties." Metallica chose a purple glittery mermaid costume for her stegosaurus, and Megadeth's brachiosaurus got a pilot outfit.

Sören picked out a sailor uniform for Anthony's shark. Anthony shook his head and rolled his eyes, chuckling. "That looks nothing like my Royal Navy uniform," Anthony said.

Sören gave him a look. "It doesn't have to. This is a shark. Pretendy fun times."

Anthony laughed harder.

Frankie picked out a butterfly fairy costume for her rainbow llama, complete with a butterfly-shaped wand, and light-up fairy wings with a rainbow sequin top and a rainbow tutu for her hot pink llama. Margrét chose a black skull hoodie, black pants, and black boots for her black teddy bear.

Sören picked out a black tuxedo for Dooku's tuxedo cat, jeans and a rainbow poo emoji sweater for his pastel kitty - Ali cracked up again at the poo emoji shirt - and his rainbow bunny got a pineapple costume. Sören made the bunny do a twirl, as he said "*Je suis ananas!*" in a high-pitched voice.

Sören also picked out a blue stuffed guitar to go with Maglor's unicorn, which made Maglor laugh, and the unicorn also got a rainbow tutu.

When it was time to go, Sören made his bunny and kitty also say goodbye to their party coordinator, and then Sören walked out of the store with the bunny on his head like it was a hat... still wearing the bear ears hat.

"You are the most ridiculous thing in existence," Ali told him.

"*Takk,*" Sören said.

They were now off to their respective vehicles, and would be meeting up at the restaurant. Maglor was carpooling with Frankie and Margrét in his Bentley, and Ali and Kenny were going in the Land Rover with the kids, and Sören was going in Anthony's Audi. Just before Maglor could get in his Bentley, Ali cornered him for a hug, getting the sense he needed one.

"Thank you," Maglor said, giving her a squeeze.

Then Kenny also came over for a hug. "The birthday boy," Maglor said, hugging him warmly. The hug lingered, and Maglor patted Kenny on the back before Kenny got in the Land Rover. Ali normally wouldn't have thought anything of it, apart from the fact that the hug was a little longer than a quick hug-before-driving-off and they took longer to pull apart than usual, and then Ali noticed Kenny was biting his lower lip when he got in the passenger seat. Ali looked over her shoulder to make sure the kids were buckled in, and when she looked back at Kenny he was no longer biting his lip but still looked a little bashful.

As Ali's keys went in the ignition, she had a memory of Maglor, Maedhros and Fingon having a threesome. She gasped.

"You all right?" Kenny glanced over at her.

"Yeh, I'm... fine." Ali glanced back at him, and then began to pull out of the parking lot, trying to focus on maneuvering even as her mind played the threesome memory and it was too hot to handle.

Ali had never known Kenny to be anything but straight, though Ali also knew straight guys typically didn't hang around with a bunch of queer guys the way Kenny did these days. Ali wondered if Kenny had memories of also being involved with Maglor when he was Fingon, and Ali thought about broaching the subject with him - obviously not now, in front of the kids - but she also felt it might be best to hold off for a bit, as she knew that was potentially even more of a bomb than her own feelings for Maglor. It wasn't like Kenny was obligated to be with Maglor - that was then, this was now - and Ali knew it was difficult enough for Kenny to wrap his head around the concept that he didn't just definitively have a past life, but one as a non-human... one as a person assumed to be strictly a fictional character. Kenny was still processing everything, and she felt like bringing up Fingon making it a triad would make things even weirder for him.

Plus, he was entitled to enjoy his birthday.

Ali had gotten Kenny a new surfboard for his birthday, which wasn't as impressive as the Vespa from Sören, but Ali had paid for a custom design of a Korean sea serpent done in a traditional style. "I think I might hit the waves later," Kenny said, leaning back in his seat.

"I thought you would." Ali smiled at him.

"Yeah. Take a ride on my Vespa, then take a ride on the water." Kenny smirked. "I may be forty, but that doesn't mean I'm too old to have fun."

"You'll probably still be surfing and riding a bike when you're eighty," Ali said.*Like father, like son,* Ali thought to herself, thinking of how spry Dooku was at his age - she imagined even before he became immortal, he was full of vigor.

"I told Dad he should try surfing," Kenny said, and Ali knew he was referring to Dooku and not to his own biological father.

Ali snorted. "I'd pay to see that."

"Well, I don't know if he will, but I'd like to see him try. I told him it's one of the best highs in the world." Then Kenny grinned. "Now there's a thought - me being eighty, surfing with Dad."

Ali grinned back and then her smile faded as that happy mental image was chased by a mental image of Fingon's death, and the chilling thought: *You may not live that long.*

Ali exhaled sharply as she came to a stop light. That was not something she wanted to think about, especially on Kenny's birthday which was supposed to be happy. Her stomach suddenly felt queasy, and she took a few deep breaths, trying to make herself think of happier things, like Megadeth and Metallica arguing about dinosaurs in Build-A-Bear.

Mercifully, one of the kids' favorite songs came on the playlist, and Ali turned it up. The kids screeched along in an imitation of Axl Rose's voice, which never failed to put a smile on Ali's face:

Welcome to the jungle
We've got fun 'n' games

We got everything you want
Honey, we know the names
We are the people that can find
Whatever you may need
If you got the money, honey
We got your disease

In the jungle
Welcome to the jungle
Watch it bring you to your
Knees, knees
I wanna watch you bleed

—

Dooku had insisted on treating everyone and though he could easily afford something more upscale, Kenny had really wanted Mexican for his birthday, so they went with one of the branches of the Beach Burrito Company, located at the north end of Bondi Beach.

Dooku was waiting for them at the restaurant parking lot, leaning against his Jaguar, wearing a baby sling with Kate and Tori in it. Sören's face lit up at the sight of Dooku wearing the baby sling, and Sören ran to him - Ali noticed then Sören was carrying his Build-A-Bear bag. "I have something for you," Sören said in a singsong voice.

Dooku chuckled. "Do you now."

As Maglor got out of his Bentley, he waved to Dooku, who smiled warmly and waved back, and Maglor took a step out of the car and then Sören said, "Where's your friend?"

"My... what?" Maglor cocked his head to one side.

"It's mean to leave your new friend in the car," Sören scolded.

Metallica and Megadeth laughed, and Ali laughed too. Shaking his head, Maglor reached in the car for his new unicorn, which elicited an eyeroll and another chuckle from Dooku when he saw it. "Dearest, what *have* you gotten everyone into?" Dooku asked, putting an arm around Sören as he led Sören towards the restaurant.

"You'll see," Sören said with a wicked grin.

Ali and Kenny exchanged glances, and then Kenny reached for their own stuffed toys. "We can't offend the High King, now," Kenny said, swinging his triceratops.

It was Ali's first time here, even though Kenny loved Mexican food; they hadn't gone for Mexican since they left Adelaide. The kids ordered from the kids' menu, with Megadeth getting a chicken burrito, and Metallica getting a taco kit. Kenny and Ali both ordered the Baja fish fajita.

Anthony ordered a prawn salad, Sören got a chicken burrito, Dooku and Maglor both got a chicken quesadilla, Frankie got chicken tacos, and Margrét got a a beef burrito. The group also ordered appetizers - jalapeño poppers, corn tortilla chips with guacamole, and sweet potato wedges. Kenny ordered a margarita, which made Sören decide on a piña colada for himself, and then he told the waiter, "And my friends will have vodka on the

rocks." Sören gestured to his kitty and bunny dolls. The waiter laughed as he took off with their order.

As they waited, Sören put the Build-A-Bear bag on Dooku's lap. Dooku took out the tuxedo cat wearing a black tuxedo and smiled fondly, tousling Sören's curls. "He's a dear," Dooku said, "and so are you." He leaned in to kiss the tip of Sören's nose.

"He's a good kitty," Sören said, petting the stuffed cat on Dooku's lap, then skritched Dooku's whiskers. "And he needs a name."

Dooku stroked his beard, considering, and then he said, "Tobias."

Sören patted the stuffed cat's head. "Hi, Toby."

"His name is *Tobias*," Dooku insisted.

"I think I'll name my owl Cornelius," Ali said, "but I don't mind if you call him Corny for short, because he is." Ali grinned.

Sören glanced at Anthony and lost it, while Anthony glared daggers, sipping his ice water. Ali remembered then that back when Kenny's brother Mike had hacked MI6's database, Kenny had informed her Anthony was a Cornelius Anthony Hewlett-Johnson. Ali tried not to laugh, and failed.

"My llamas are Winifred and William," Frankie said.

"My bear's name is Death," Margrét said.

"My dinosaur's name is Butt," Megadeth informed everyone.

"And mine is Fart." Metallica made farting noises.

Sören looked at Anthony. Anthony looked around as if to say*who, me?* and then he looked at his shark and back at Sören, looking a little sheepish. "I guess my shark's name is Fin."

Ali snorted, considering how ubiquitous names with "Fin" were in the family, and of course Anthony didn't know that, though she wondered if he somehow knew it subconsciously. Kenny had chosen that moment to take a sip of ice water and promptly ended up spitting, which accidentally gave Sören's cat a bath. Sören made a cat screech and clutched the kitty to himself, looking aghast.

Maglor raised an eyebrow, smirking. "Definitely part of the family," Maglor muttered before he sipped on his ice water, and Ali knew he wasn't talking about the shark. The hair on Ali's arms and the back of her neck stood on end, and she wondered *who* Anthony was. She wondered if Sören had picked up on it, but then Sören patted the shark and said, "Welcome to the family, Fin," and Ali realized it went over Sören's head; he was just thinking of the shark's fins.

Ada's still a muppet, I see.

"What about you?" Sören looked at Maglor. "Your unicorn needs a name."

Maglor laughed, shaking his head. "I barely thought I'd be taking home something from Build-A-Bear, let alone have to come up with a name for it. Names are important, they

take time..."

"Marcus," Sören said, careful to use his alias in public, "it's a stuffed toy. Just... think of a name."

Maglor gave Sören a look, and Sören gave Maglor a look right back. "Come onnnnn," Sören said. He took the unicorn and made the unicorn hop up and down. "I need a name, name me!" Sören squeaked, making the unicorn nod.

Maglor laughed, shaking his head again. "Hells..."

Sören made the unicorn crane its head to look at him, and then the unicorn nodded and clapped its front hooves. "Hells! My name is Hells!"

"No -" But it was too late. Maglor facepalmed as Sören tossed the unicorn over to him. "Dammit, Sören..."

"Now what about you?" Anthony smirked. "Since you're so insistent everyone's friends have to have names."

"This is Fabulous," Sören said, pointing to the rainbow bunny, and then he used his napkin to dab at the damp pastel kitty. "And this..." Sören snickered. "Is a wet ass pussy."

"Oh my god..." Anthony buried his face in his hands and made noises. "You can't name it Wet Ass Pussy, Sören."

"I'm not naming him Wet Ass Pussy Sören, I'm naming him Wet Ass Pussy -"

Anthony made more noises. Ali and Kenny shook with silent laughter. Megadeth and Metallica were giggling now, which made it even funnier to Ali; they heard worse, considering how prevalent the word *cunt* was in Australia.

"Oh all right, since children are present, I'll call him WAP," Sören said, saying "whap" instead of the letters.

"That... no. That's not a name, Sören." Anthony scowled.

"You're right. It needs more substance." Sören grinned. "WAPthony."

Anthony made more noises. Ali thought she was going to die from laughter. Dooku gave Sören a disapproving look but his eyes twinkled with amusement.

"That's terrible," Anthony said.

"I'll call him Tony for short." Sören smirked, and broadcasted that he knew Anthony hated being called Tony. Anthony's eyes narrowed, and Sören stuck out his tongue.

Ali spoke into Kenny's mind. *I want to lock these two in a room until they fuck. This is getting downright unbearable.* Then there was a pause, as Ali realized what she just said. *Un-bear-able.*

Kenny groaned and playfully kicked Ali under the table.

Chapter 24

Sören was taking a nap when Dooku got home from the restaurant that Friday evening; Sören was woken up from his nap by Dooku petting his curls and raining little kisses over his face. When Sören opened his eyes, they rubbed noses, before Dooku kissed the tip of Sören's nose and stroked his cheek. Sören smiled at him adoringly, putting a hand on Dooku's heart, wanting him to feel the love in his touch.

"Hello, sweetheart," Dooku said, his hand moving from Sören's cheek to his beard.

"Hi, Daddy." Sören yawned and stretched. Dooku had changed out of his white chef's uniform, into black silk pajamas. Sören felt that familiar thrust in his loins at the sight of Dooku's silver chest hair peeking out of the V neck of his pajama top. Then Sören looked at the alarm clock on the bedtable. "Wow, it's after seven already? Shit, I slept longer than I thought I would."

"Clearly, you needed the rest." Dooku raised an eyebrow. "As you know, you were up late last night painting, after all."

"Yes, I know." Sören smiled and now he kissed the tip of Dooku's nose; he found all the *as you knows* endearing. Sören sat up, stretched again, and then Dooku pulled Sören close, and Sören rubbed his nose in the chest hair exposed with Dooku's pajama top, finding it soothing and arousing all at once. Dooku's arms tightened around Sören and he rocked him, rubbing his nose in Sören's curls.

"How was work?" Sören reached up to skritch Dooku's whiskers, making him smile.

"The restaurant was busy as usual - perhaps a bit more than usual, as it is a Friday - but it was satisfying." Dooku nodded. "I must say, though the circumstances that brought us here and made us change our lives so radically, were... unfortunate... I rather enjoy the restaurant and I wish I'd retired from law and had the idea to open a restaurant much, much sooner than I did."

"Awwww, Nico." Sören pouted. "Well, better late than never. And at least we've got, ah, some semblance of normality now."

"For a time. Hopefully it will last." Dooku's face registered concern, and then he patted Sören and gave a small, tight smile. "But we must be ever mindful that our lives are *not* normal."

"As if I could forget," Sören said with a snort, and used the Force to put his bunny slippers on his feet, to illustrate his point.

"Indeed. But you know what I mean." Their eyes met, and held. "We made mistakes in Akureyri that we cannot make again, and the stakes are higher. I believe they are higher still, now that it seems we are on our own and don't have friends in other places."

"With friends like those, who needs enemies?" Sören's nostrils flared. He had been in a good mood, waking up from his nap to one of his beloveds, and he didn't want it ruined

thinking about *him* and *them* again.

"Exactly." With that, Dooku rose to his feet, and helped Sören up, though he didn't need help. He led Sören out to the kitchen, where Maglor and Ali were making dinner together, and there was a fresh pot of coffee waiting; Dooku knew Sören's habits well. Dooku made Sören a cup of coffee the way he liked it and used the Force to push the mug over to him as Dooku walked into the living room to take his seat, with a cup of tea for himself.

As Sören drank, Huan came over. Sören heard laughter from outside and looked out through the glass doors - it was dark outside but the garden was lit up with lamps and fairy lights, and Sören could see Kenny playing frisbee with Megadeth and Metallica. Sören glanced back at Dooku and smiled before he resumed sipping his coffee. Kate and Tori were nearby in their bassinet, sucking on pacifiers.

"The one thing I regret about my job is not getting to get out as much during the day, as I was in the habit of doing back in Iceland," Dooku said.

Dooku had lived as a retiree in Iceland and during the day he'd gone for regular walks, as well as motorbike rides, and sometimes he and Sören, and sometimes also Maglor, went on trips to beautiful places in the area. Sören knew that it wasn't just the activity Dooku missed, but Iceland itself, and Sören once again felt a pang for his homeland.

And not just for Iceland, but for the life they'd had there. Things had been simpler. Now so much was uncertain... and so much was terrifying in its uncertainty.

"It was a beautiful day today," Sören said, trying to make himself think of his new home, and what he liked about living in Sydney - what he liked about his new life - to not get too sad. Immediately he thought of Anthony, the Krav practice and run earlier. "Anthony and I ran from Bondi to Tamarama and back. You ought to come with us sometime, see the shark."

Dooku's eyebrows went up. "There are sharks at the beach?"

Ali snorted, and then Sören shook his head and said, "No, near Tamarama there's an ancient Aboriginal rock carving that looks like a shark. People say it's a whale, but it has gills."

"You know," Ali said, "I'd like to see this myself. Relevant to my interests, and all."

"Yeah, you should totally see it," Sören said, nodding. "I'm surprised you haven't."

"Well, I've lived my entire life in South Australia up until seven months ago. I haven't gotten around much. But maybe I should plan a tour of different Aboriginal carving sites, starting with this one. The kids should see them, too. It would be educational. 'Look, our ancestors did this.' Though, all those outsiders thinking it's so spiritual, I have to wonder how much of that was like the ancient equivalent of graffiti, or saying 'Kilroy was here.'"

Sören laughed. "That's how a lot of Icelanders feel about the runes."

"I would also like to see any carvings that the public has access to," Dooku said. "As you know, I have great interest in history." He looked at Sören. "I would very much like to see the shark carving with you. I am also overdue for paying a visit to Tamarama."

"It's a small beach but it's beautiful," Sören said. "Actually, it's the subject of my latest painting."

"Ah, I was wondering what you were painting but didn't want to pry." Dooku smiled.

Ali's eyebrow went up. "You're painting again?"

Sören nodded. "Yesterday I got, ah... inspired." He was feeling stronger after his pride had been broken, and the old creative juices came flooding back and Sören pulled an all-nighter with his art for the first time in too long; it was why he had napped so long in the late afternoon, after going from the all-nighter to the pole, Krav, and a run.

"It's good to see you painting again," Maglor said quietly. "I know that you were encouraged to be careful with showing your work because you have such a distinctive style, but I've still missed seeing you make art."

"I'm being careful," Sören said, nodding. "This isn't for a gallery or any sort of public display. It's... a gift." Specifically, it was a gift for Anthony, whose flat was so spartan, looking like someplace to eat and sleep rather than someplace he actually lived. Anthony had admired Sören's art that he'd seen, so Sören wanted to make something just for him. Even with Anthony's compliments about what he'd seen, though, Sören was nervous, worried that Anthony wouldn't like the finished product, whenever Sören declared it finished. He felt stupid about being so self-conscious... and wanting to impress him.

Sören bit his lower lip, cheeks burning.

Ali, of course, seemed to catch that right away. "Oh, is it for *Anthony?*"

Dammit. Sören shifted in his seat. "Jæja."

Maglor was chopping vegetables and throwing them into a wok, and he gave Sören a sly look as he chopped. "It's nice you're making something for your boyfriend."

Sören huffed. "He is not my boyfriend."

Maglor grinned, while Ali shook with silent laughter.

Dooku attempted to keep his expression neutral, but Sören could see the amusement in his eyes. Sören glared, and Dooku gave him a small smile and patted his shoulder.

I know, Dooku spoke into his mind.

No, you don't know. He and I are not that way.

Yet. Dooku sipped his tea.

It wasn't just Sören's cheeks that were burning now, but his entire body felt like it was on fire. Sören put his coffee down, got up and stretched again, and said, "I'm gonna step outside for a few minutes, get some air." He tousled Huan's fur. "Come on."

Huan followed Sören outside, and Sören looked up at the night sky, pacing around a little. Looking at the sky at night inevitably reminded Sören of Dag... and being reminded of Dag reminded Sören of everyone else he'd lost.

He had feelings for Anthony, and he couldn't deny that. But he was terrified of getting involved with Anthony and losing yet another person he loved.

Sören looked down at his bunny slippers with a deep sigh just as Dooku stepped outside to join him, not bothering to mask his presence in the Force. Dooku came up alongside him and just put his hand on Sören's shoulder.

Sören felt irrationally angry now - not with Dooku, but with life itself. Even though he'd hated the mere concept of running just a few short days ago, he had the urge to run now, of course he knew he couldn't outrun his troubles. He appreciated Dooku's strength and comfort, but Sören also felt like he was weak for needing it like he did - he knew Dooku didn't feel that way, but it was hard to shake the voices of his past. Einar. Justin. It was hard to not feel weak and powerless with what was out there, lurking in the shadows.

"I wanted to tell you myself that it's good that you're painting again," Dooku said, putting an arm around Sören's waist and squeezing. Sören rested his head on Dooku's shoulder. "And I'm proud of the progress you're making with running... with doing Krav Maga."

"*Takk*," Sören said. That meant a lot to him, considering how active Dooku was, even before he'd become immortal - that had been one of the things that had impressed Sören about him, was his vigor at his age.

"As you know, you and I have not sparred in some time now."

Sören frowned. Dooku and Maglor had taught him how to fight with a sword. It was something Sören had put off to the wayside after the move to Sydney. He had a feeling Dooku hadn't forgotten about it, but he'd been hoping Dooku would forget about it a while longer.

"I know," Sören said simply.

"We should change that. Get back in the habit -"

Sören turned to face Dooku and their eyes met. Sören decided to be honest with him about why he'd been avoidant about picking the sword back up since they'd come to Sydney, and especially why he hadn't over the last month even as he was learning Krav and learning how to use a gun, and continuing the study of the sword would also be useful for self-defense purposes. "That sword I use... it's not mine."

Dooku's eyebrows went up, and he waited for Sören to go on.

"It's... it's Maglor's sword. I mean, yes, I made it, but I made it *for him*. It feels wrong." Sören folded his arms and rocked back on his heels. "When I was Fëanor... I used to make things specifically for a single person. Ah... attuned, keyed, to their energy, I guess you could call it. I *can* use somebody else's sword, but it doesn't feel as right as one made *for me*. God, that sounds fucking crazy..."

"No, it doesn't." Dooku grabbed Sören's hands, pulling his arms out, and squeezed Sören's hands before letting go and wrapping his arms around Sören. "I remember, Fëanáro. As you know, you made my shield."

"Jæja." Sören's brow furrowed as his mind conjured up an image of Fingolfin fallen at Morgoth's feet, a crystal broken from the shield. Sören wanted to scream, not wanting to think about Fingolfin's death again.

"You could learn to blacksmith," Dooku said, head cocked to one side. "Or, re-learn, rather. I imagine you'd catch on quickly with the memories you have from before."

"I could, but I remember how labor-intensive that shit was back when I knew how to do it, and nobody starts at the top with making something like that right off the bat."

"You're not nobody," Dooku said simply.

Sören sighed and looked down. He knew Dooku had a point, but he still worried about failing, which would enrage him. And yet, he knew that if he didn't at least try, he wouldn't have a sword and wouldn't be able to spar with Dooku and Maglor again, and it was important to keep honing his swordsmanship.

There was still an additional reason why Sören was hesitant to pick a sword back up, and now he spoke it aloud, looking into Dooku's eyes again. "Also, fighting with a sword reminds me of Loki..."

Sören's voice trailed off, not able to complete the sentence... not knowing what else there was to say. Dooku knew that Sören was speaking of when he had visited them last after the Dagorath happened, and before Dag was taken. During that visit they had sparred.

Dooku held him tight, rocking him as Sören fell apart on his shoulder, sobbing. Then Sören sobbed harder as he realized. "Oh god. The solstice. The fucking winter solstice is coming up on..."

"On Sunday," Dooku said, nodding, rubbing Sören's back.

It was still strange to Sören to be thinking of the winter solstice in June rather than December. Sören remembered that his “second first time” with Ingwion had been on the summer solstice in June 2019.

"I know." Dooku picked up Sören's chin and looked into Sören's eyes - there were unshed tears in Dooku's own dark eyes, impossible sadness, feeling Sören's grief across their bond. “I feel like I failed you. I wish I had never given him permission to touch you -”

“Don't blame yourself.” Sören took Dooku's face in his hands and kissed him hard, needing to forget for a moment, needing that tangible connection with what he still had. Dooku kissed him back with the same hungry passion, and when they pulled apart, catching their breath, Sören fought the urge to grab Dooku's wrist and drag him off, to hell with dinner, this was what he wanted to feast on. But he didn't. That could wait. They needed to be around their other family, too.

"I know it hurts, sweetheart," Dooku said, echoing what Sören felt inside.

"It's going to hurt for a long time."

"I understand your reservations with the sword," Dooku said. "And I know this weekend coming up will be difficult for you."

"Jæja." Sören rubbed his nose in Dooku's beard, and then Dooku tilted his face down and their noses rubbed. Dooku stroked Sören's cheek, and when their eyes met, though Dooku's dark eyes were sad, they were also full of love.

"I have an idea," Dooku said. "On Sunday evening... I know it is customary for the family to dine together, but perhaps we could let the rest of the family have their usual Sunday dinner, and you and I could have an evening to ourselves."

"A date night."

"Yes." Dooku raised an eyebrow. "Would you like that?"

Though Sören felt a little guilty about not attending the usual family dinner on Sunday night, and hoped nobody would take it personally, especially not Anthony, Sören felt that was what he and Dooku both needed. "I would," Sören said. "I'd like that a lot."

"Good. I'll make reservations for someplace nice, and then we can return here and... take our minds off things."

Sören snickered, needing levity to drive off the pain. "Is that what we're calling it now."

Dooku shook his head and facepalmed, chuckling. "Dearest, you're terrible."

"*Takk.*"

When Dooku took his hand away from his face his cheeks were pink; Sören grinned at him, pleased that even after close to four years together he could make Dooku blush. And he had memories of Fëanor making Fingolfin blush, long ago.

Dooku gave Sören a little kiss and began leading him back in the direction of the house, with Huan following along. As the doors opened, the wonderful smell of pad thai hit Sören's nose. "Oh, is that what you're making?" Sören smiled at Maglor and Ali; already the night looked more hopeful.

"Pad thai with chicken," Ali said.

"I've never made pad thai before," Maglor confessed, "but Ali says she used to make it at least once a week back in Adelaide..."

"I learned it from Kenny," Ali said. "We would trade off cooking, when I wasn't on the road."

"Yeah, obviously it's not Korean food but there's a ton of Thai places in SoCal," Kenny said. "My brother used to date someone whose parents owned a Thai restaurant and I hit her up for recipes."

Sören wanted to sit Kenny down sometime and hear his life story; he'd been to the States exactly once, months ago, to visit Disney World, but he hadn't interacted much with people, and hadn't met too many Americans over the years. "I'd like to try Korean food, too," Sören said.

"Really? I've been holding off on springing it on you guys because I've been told it's an acquired taste," Kenny said.

Sören gave him a stern look. "Listen, I'm from Iceland. Have you heard of Þorramatur? Nothing your culture eats will weird me out."

Kenny chuckled. "We do like fish."

"Then I'll probably like it. I could eat fish every day of my life." Sören looked at Ali and Maglor then, smiling at the way they were standing close at the wok. *At least someone's happy.* "Though that pad thai smells amazing. I'm sure it'll be amazing."

"And it's good that you're expanding your culinary horizons, Macalaurë," Dooku said. "As

you know, I think cooking is an art form."

"Translation: he has a fetish for seeing guys in the kitchen," Sören said.

Now it was Maglor's turn to blush, and his grin as he laughed lit up his whole face. "Just don't ask me to make you a sandwich," he teased.

"No, that's Sören's job," Dooku said, giving Sören a naughty look that let Sören know he was thinking of something else entirely.

Sören crinkled his nose and bit his lower lip, cheeks burning. "Oh myyyyyy."

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Sunday the twentieth came, and after Sören's run with Anthony he stayed, since he would be having dinner with the family, even though Sören himself was not going to be in attendance. Anthony understood, but nonetheless Sören detected a touch of disappointment in his eyes and felt a pang of guilt. He, too, would miss Anthony tonight. And yet, this was something he and Dooku both needed. Sören also felt like it would be good for Anthony, a way to show him that he was genuinely welcome and liked, that Anthony wasn't just tolerated for Sören's sake.

Having Anthony stick around after the run was also good for an additional reason. It had been a long time since Sören had done anything formal enough to require dressing up; he had an aversion to it, feeling like he was doing a bad drag performance. Sören knew this wasn't just his working-class roots, but a leftover of his life as Fëanor, who, while he enjoyed making beautiful jewelry for others to wear, also strongly disliked the pomp of court and preferred to spend time in his forge in work clothes, or out in the wilds, dressed more roughly. Sören thought Anthony looked like the type of guy who probably had worn a suit at least a few times and wore it well - he frequently thought Anthony would make a good James Bond - so he wanted Anthony's opinion on suits.

Sören needed to shower after his run before he tried anything on, and when he called down for Anthony to help with wardrobe selection, Sören was in a pair of boxer briefs and nothing else, fresh from the shower, his curls still damp. Anthony's jaw dropped as he entered the room, but he quickly composed himself, giving a little clear of the throat as he came closer and then began to circle, which reminded Sören of a shark. "So... you... wanted my help?"

Across their developing Force bond, Sören knew Anthony's mind was in the gutter, and so was Sören's. This was the sort of moment that a cheesily scripted porn movie would take full advantage of, with Sören wanting to try Anthony on his body. And as much as Sören wanted, made all the more intense by having so little clothing on and feeling the hunger in Anthony's gaze, making Sören's nipples harden, his cock stirring and making an obvious bulge in his boxer briefs, Sören tried to behave himself.

So Sören just nodded and headed for the walk-in closet. "I'm gonna try on a few suits and I want your opinion of which one looks better, or at least, more appropriate for the evening out."

"All right." Anthony looked at the bed. "May I sit?"

Sören nodded, and Anthony sat on the edge of the bed. Anthony on his bed did nothing to

calm Sören's libido, and Sören resisted the urge to pounce him as he stepped into the walk-in closet.

The first suit was the oldest one Sören had - he'd worn it to his aunt Katrín's funeral back in November 2017, and it permanently had associations of that time, but the memory was a relief more than a sadness, seeing Katrín's body and knowing she was truly dead now and couldn't hurt him or his siblings or Ari anymore. The suit was dark grey wool, with a matching waistcoat, and the shirt to go with it was off-white, the tie a darker grey than the suit. Even though Sören knew Anthony was attracted to him and the feeling was mutual - *and how* - Sören felt a bit nervous as he buttoned up his shirt, buttoned up his waistcoat, knotted his tie. He felt ridiculous wearing a suit, and he didn't want Anthony to think he looked ridiculous... which made Sören feel even more ridiculous, since he and Anthony weren't an item, and weren't going to be an item.

Sören stepped out of the closet, walked like he was on a runway, did a little spin, and walked back.

"Wow," Anthony said, eyes wide. "You... ah. Look nice." Anthony's cheeks were pink.

Sören's heart skipped a beat and his stomach started doing somersaults. "You think so?"

"I'd be honest with you if I thought you looked like an arse."*You have a nice arse,* Anthony broadcasted.

Sören's stomach fluttered, and he muttered a "*takk*" before he dipped back into the closet. The second suit was the one he'd gotten married to Dooku in, back in September 2018. It was black, with a white shirt and black tie. It was also Armani, which Sören had felt intensely self-conscious about, but had accepted the gift from Dooku, wanting the best for his husband. Thinking of their wedding made him sad in a way that thinking about his aunt's funeral did not - it wasn't that Sören regretted marrying Dooku, he had no regrets about that whatsoever, except he wished they'd found each other a long time ago, but there was a sort of innocence back then that had been lost, before they found out they were players in an ancient conflict.

When Sören came out he felt even more nervous this time around. He did another spin. "Jæja?"

Anthony pursed his lips. He looked Sören up and down, his gaze penetrating, and nodded. "You look sharp," he said. "But that seems a bit too formal for a restaurant, unless Nicolaas is taking you to a ballet or opera at the Opera House first."

He wasn't, as far as Sören knew. It occurred to Sören then that he hadn't been to the Opera House since they moved to Sydney, and it was such an amazing piece of architecture that the Fëanor part of him felt it was almost a sin that he hadn't been there yet. He would have to go sometime, and he thought about maybe taking Harrison and Ari, since they would be visiting soon. Thinking of the architecture of the Opera House got Sören thinking about forging again, feeling like some sort of impostor about forging a sword. *You stop that,* the Fëanor part of him chided as he went back into the closet. As Sören undressed, he wondered about building an extension on the house for a forge, and then he kicked himself mentally. *You can't just do one thing. Wheels upon wheels.*He'd always been like that, and he knew he was even more like that when he was Fëanor... and he realized that was what was bugging him. Something in him was definitely awakening, he was always himself but it felt like he was starting to become even more like his old self again...

...and he didn't want to fuck it up this time. Not with Fingolfin, and definitely not with Finarfin, wherever he was.

Sören once again wondered about Finarfin's whereabouts as he tried on the last suit. Something was nagging the back of his mind and he couldn't quite put his finger on it, and he decided he needed to get off that subject mentally, trying to make himself focus. This was also a black suit, but it was a different cut, and he was wearing it as just a blazer and trousers, and a black shirt underneath, no tie. He came out with his arms outstretched.

"Does where you're going require a tie as dress code?" Anthony asked.

Sören shook his head.

"Then that one." Anthony pointed and stroked his chin, nodding. "Black is your color."

Sören laughed. "Black's always been my color. All right, that's easier, I don't have to change from this into something else."

He did, however, have to get the lint roller before he left, because his cats all decided they wanted pettings and cuddles, and Sören ended up wearing cat hair. It was Dooku who brushed him off, while Anthony watched from across the room, looking wistful. When their eyes met, Sören felt across their Force bond that Anthony wasn't just admiring Sören, but Dooku as well. Sören saw the flash of a mental image of a young Anthony with a silver-haired, silver-bearded gentleman who bore a resemblance to Dooku but had blue eyes, and then it was gone.

The thought of making love to Anthony was delicious enough, but the thought of having a threesome with Anthony and Dooku... Sören exhaled sharply as Dooku put the lint roller down. He needed to get out of here before he lost all sanity and dragged Anthony and Dooku to the bedroom. He *definitely* didn't need Anthony to be even harder to resist.

"Shall we go?" Dooku asked, hooking his arm through Sören's.

Sören nodded, making himself focus, looking into those warm chocolate eyes, reaching up to touch Dooku's cheek and slide his hand down to skritch the beard before they departed.

Dooku also looked dapper - he'd been a career barrister and in the habit of wearing suits, so it was much more natural to him. He was wearing a navy blue suit with a light blue shirt and a darker blue pinstripe tie. He didn't just look nice in and of itself, but Dooku knew Sören's favorite color was blue, and of course, blue reminded the Fëanor part of him of Fingolfin's eyes. Not that Sören had a problem with the color of Dooku's eyes now, a rich deep brown, almost black, and expressive. He still got lost in those eyes, and he kept stealing glances at Dooku now, feeling the same giddy, flustered feeling that he felt in Dooku's presence when their love was new four years ago.

Dooku had not told Sören in advance where they were going and it turned out that they were in fact going to the Opera House - there was an upscale restaurant there called Bennelong. Sören's eyes widened as he saw Dooku pulling into the parking for the Opera House. "Oh shit, if you had told me we're going to the Opera House I would have worn one of my other suits, with a tie," Sören said, feeling nervous all over again.

"You needn't wear a tie for this. Dress code is business casual, there will be some people here wearing suits, but it's not required. Your attire looks fine, or I would have said something to you on the way out." Dooku glanced over and looked Sören up and down,

and smiled. "You look more than fine, my dear."

Sören laughed. "OK." Then he shook his head, laughing some more, delighted. "I was just thinking earlier I wanted to see the Opera House sometime."

"Of course." Dooku nodded. "I thought you might, considering the aesthetics." He gestured towards the Opera House. "I made sure we'd leave with enough time that we can take a bit of a tour and still be on time for our reservation."

Sören squeaked and clapped his hands excitedly, then realized how ridiculous that looked, like he was an overgrown child, all the more ridiculous for being dressed up and reacting that way. But Dooku just chuckled, his smile broadening, his eyes adoring. "Don't change, sweetheart." He leaned in to kiss the tip of Sören's nose as he parked the Jaguar.

Though it was Sören, under his alias of Stefan Kierkegaard, and Maglor as Marcus Lauer, who were listed on paper as being married here in Sydney - which Anthony had explained would cause fewer raised eyebrows should the issue come up - Sören and Dooku nonetheless held hands as they walked to the Opera House. Sören paused to take a few selfies of himself and Dooku with the white sails of the Opera House in the background, not that he could maintain social media profiles anymore with the life he lived, but they could be uploaded directly to a hard drive for posterity.

Just the exterior of the Opera House up close took Sören's breath away, a chill going through him, hair raising, heart beating faster as he approached. It was one thing to see the Opera House in pictures, and from a distance, and another thing to come face to face with it, taking in every detail and the sheer majesty of it.

Sören took more pictures, this time of the Opera House itself, from different angles as they walked around the structure. He and Dooku also paused every so often to admire Sydney Harbour and the view of the bridge. Then they saw an amazing sight, a seal sunbathing on the unoccupied northern VIP steps of the Opera House. Sören squeaked again, loudly enough to draw looks from passerby. He clapped his hand over his mouth and pointed, making a high-pitched noise through the hand over his mouth. He started tugging at Dooku's sleeve, as if Dooku wasn't seeing it too. "Seal!" Sören said.

Sören had never seen a seal before outside of photos, and it was even more adorable in person. The seal didn't appear to be hurt, but seemed to just be relaxing.

"That's Benny," a dark-haired middle-aged woman said; Sören smiled at her Australian accent. "He visits the Opera House regularly. There's more fish in the Harbour now so he feeds there and rests here."

"He's so cute, I'm gonna die," Sören said, and immediately felt stupid saying that. He felt ready to explode from the cuteness of the seal curled up on the steps, like an overgrown cat.

The woman smiled. "He's a long-nosed fur seal."

Sören looked at Dooku and spoke, *Oh, like you,* into Dooku's mind. Dooku narrowed his eyes at Sören before giving the woman a polite smile. "Thank you for the information," Dooku said.

"You're welcome. You're tourists?"

"We live in Sydney now," Dooku said.

"Oh, very nice. Well, welcome to Australia! I hope you like it here," the woman said, before walking off.

"EEEEEEEEEEEE," Sören said, not wanting to stop looking at the seal.

Dooku chuckled and now it was his turn to tug on Sören's sleeve. "As you know, we have a reservation..."

"Yeah, yeah."

Sören had another jaw-dropping experience when he saw the menu in Bennelong. They weren't hurting for money, but Sören still did a double take at the price tag, and thought to himself that he was a long way away from how he'd grown up, or his experience with living in poverty as a barista and struggling artist in Greenwich. But everything on the menu looked delicious. "We can each order three courses, and a side," Dooku said, glancing over his menu at Sören.

After some thought, Sören went with a steak tartare of David Blackmore wagyu beef, smoked, served with pickled mushrooms, and scallops with eggplant and smoked bacon, and King George whiting with palm heart and smoked tomato beurre blanc, with a side of young potatoes, served with sesame and seaweed butter. Dooku also chose the steak tartare, and a blue manna crab congee, and squid with shiitake noodles, with a side of seasonal vegetables and smoked almond butter. Dooku also ordered them each a glass of Sauvignon Blanc, and they had ice water while they waited. Sören started playing footsie under the table with Dooku, which made him smile.

"One of these days we shall have to go on a proper tour of the Opera House," Dooku said. "There is a lot to see."

"I was thinking that," Sören said, nodding. *One of these days. If Odin doesn't kill us all first.* Sören sighed. He didn't want to ruin the mood, so he reached for the dessert menu to distract himself. Before he could open it, Dooku put a hand on his wrist.

"I have dessert waiting for us at home," Dooku said.

Sören raised an eyebrow, but that explained why Dooku had been up late last night and busy this afternoon. "Oh, Nico." And then Sören had an idea for another kind of dessert he could give Dooku when they got home... Dooku hadn't seen him on the pole yet, and Sören thought it was time for some eye candy.

Sören's mind was elsewhere for much of the meal, thinking about the pole dance he was going to give Dooku when they got back home, which led to thinking about the meditation room and the house itself... the necessity of building a forge if he was going to make a sword.

Dooku picked up on that. "You're thinking about a forge, aren't you?"

Sören nodded. "There's really no way around it. I could try to find a master blacksmith and ask to use their workshop, but..." Sören made a vague hand gesture, and showed Dooku a mental image of Fëanor smithing, the Flame Imperishable quickening with every blow of his hammer, and Sören's fear that he'd be so in tune with his old self that he'd slip and accidentally use the Force in front of the blacksmith he was working with. "I'd rather do it myself, in my own turf." Sören chuckled before he sipped his ice water; it was suddenly

too warm in the restaurant. "I can't believe I'm even thinking about this."

"I can." Their eyes met. Dooku's voice lowered as he said, "This is something you*need* to do for yourself, Fëanáro. Reclaiming another thing that was lost."

"Jæja." Once again Sören felt his hair stand on end, a shiver down his spine. He thought about the Sydney Opera House, and in his mind's eye he saw himself as Fëanor drawing up the plans for Formenos, his fortress, his sanctuary in the north of Valinor, in the boreal forest. He didn't want to go back to Valinor, but nonetheless he'd missed the satisfaction of constructing someplace beautiful and practical to live. And while Sören knew he couldn't go back to Iceland anytime soon, he knew that Norway and Sweden and Finland had boreal forest, and he could get a taste of things he'd been missing there - the midnight sun in summer, the aurora in winter. He wanted a vacation house in one of those countries, much as he'd mocked spoiled rich people in the past for having vacation homes. Sören looked down, scowling. "It's a shame I don't know an architect." That was another thing Sören wanted to relearn.

"Are you planning something?" Dooku leaned back in his seat, his head cocked to one side.

"Mmmmmmmmmmmmmaybe."

Dooku smiled into his ice water. "Good."

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Sören felt like he was going to burst by the time they left the restaurant, and had no idea how Dooku expected them to have room for dessert when they got home. But Dooku didn't drive them home immediately, taking a detour to drive along the coast, which helped settle their stomachs as well as created a romantic ambiance, seeing the coast of Sydney lit up at night. By the time they got back to the mansion Sören was less full.

"I will go to the kitchen and get our dessert out, if you want to head around to the backyard," Dooku said as they pulled in.

"Why don't you wait a few minutes for that, and follow me to the meditation room? There's something I want to show you."

In the meditation room, Dooku took a seat. Sören started with a blast from the past, putting a song on the stereo that he'd done a striptease to for Dooku's birthday in 2017. As the song started Sören walked towards Dooku, hips swaying in time to the music.

¡Oh!
Tú, tú eres el imán y yo soy el metal
Me voy acercando y voy armando el plan
Sólo con pensarlo se acelera el pulso
Ya, ya me está gustando más de lo normal
Todos mis sentidos van pidiendo más
Esto hay que tomarlo sin ningún apuro

Sören pulled off his blazer, and let it fall to the floor.

Despacito

Sören began to unbutton his shirt in time with the music.

Quiero respirar tu cuello despacito
Deja que te diga cosas al oído
Para que te acuerdes si no estás conmigo
Despacito
Quiero desnudarte a besos despacito
Firmo en las paredes de tu laberinto
Y hacer de tu cuerpo todo un manuscrito
(Sube, sube, sube, sube, sube)

Sören's shirt fell to the floor - Dooku used the Force to pick up the blazer and shirt from the floor and fold them neatly, though his eyes were fixed on Sören, who came closer, took Dooku's hands and ran them over Dooku's bare chest. He thrust his hips to the music as he guided Dooku's hands to undo his belt, and as the next part of the song started, Sören got out of his shoes, trousers and socks. He was at last in nothing but his boxer briefs, shaking his ass from a few feet away:

Si te pido un beso ven dámelo
Yo sé que estás pensándolo
Llevo tiempo intentándolo
Mami, esto es dando y dándolo
Sabes que tu corazón conmigo te hace bang-bang
Sabes que esa beba está buscando de mi bang-bang
Ven prueba de mi boca para ver cómo te sabe
Quiero, quiero, quiero ver cuánto amor a ti te cabe
Yo no tengo prisa, yo me quiero dar el viaje
Empecemos lento, después salvaje

Sören came closer again, giving Dooku a lapdance for the remainder of the song. By the end of the song Dooku was flushed and breathing harder, and Sören smirked at the obvious bulge in Dooku's trousers - Sören was hard too, mind racing with everything he wanted to do. But he was far from done.

The song Sören had chosen to work the pole to was "Inside My Love" by Minnie Riperton - a song that came out before Sören was born. It was a slow, sensual song, which was the mood Sören was going for. He began to walk around the pole in circles, hands gripping the pole, sliding, almost caressing, as the song started.

Two people, just meeting, barely touching each other
Two spirits, greeting, tryna carry it further
You are one, and I am another
We should be one, inside each other

Sören began to climb the pole for the chorus.

You can see inside me - will you come inside me?
Do you wanna ride inside my love?
You can see inside me - will you come inside me?
Do you wanna ride inside my love?

Sören slid down the pole, and now for the next verse and chorus he began to do fireman spins.

Two strangers - not strangers - only lacking the knowing
So willing, feeling - infinite growing
While we're here, the whole world is turning
We should be one, fulfilling the yearning

You can see inside me - will you come inside me?
Do you wanna ride inside my love?
You can see inside me - will you come inside me?
Do you wanna ride inside my love?

At last for the instrumental bridge he did cradle spins, and with the final chorus he climbed the pole again and bent back before sliding down.

"You're beautiful," Dooku said when the song ended.

Sören took a small bow. "*Takk*."

"That is... truly impressive. Not just in the obvious, sexy sense, but also... artistic. Athletic." Dooku smiled. "If you keep doing that, you'll get the arm strength to swing a hammer in the forge."

Sören hadn't realized that, but now it made sense to him why he felt drawn to pole dancng, besides the fact that it was sexy. He could lift his own body weight now, and that was important for the sort of intensive hammering that forging a sword required... or forging other things.

"Come," Dooku said, taking Sören by the hand.

Sören waited at the door to the yard in his boxer briefs, hoping there wasn't going to be an awkward moment with Kenny or one of the kids passing by, while Dooku changed into pajamas and got dessert out of the kitchen. Then Dooku led Sören into the yard, and Sören's mouth opened, letting out yet another squeak of delight when he saw what was waiting in the yard.

At some point since last night, Dooku had set up something akin to an outdoor blanket fort - a black mosquito net canopy draped over bedding and pillows, and a small end table. Fairy lights and LED lanterns glowed inside the canopy, amplifying the glow of the waxing gibbous moon hanging in the sky above.

Sören climbed through the canopy, settling on top of the bedding, and Dooku followed, putting a covered tray on top of the end table. Sören gasped with delight as Dooku presented the dessert - tiramisu made with ladyfingers, small bowls of stracciatella gelato, and strawberries with whipped cream.

"I made the gelato myself," Dooku said; Sören knew without being told Dooku had also made the tiramisu himself.

"Oh god." Sören swooned. "You spoil me."

"You deserve to be spoilt, love." Dooku stroked Sören's cheek, smiling.

Sören took Dooku's hand and kissed it. Then Sören dipped a spoon into the gelato. "We better start with this before it melts." Sören gave Dooku a pointed look. "It's getting pretty hot in here."

Dooku smirked, eyes twinkling.

Sören took the spoon and brought it to Dooku's lips. They took turns spoon-feeding each other, first the gelato, then the tiramisu. At last it was time for the strawberries, which did not need a spoon. Dooku dipped a strawberry in the cream and lifted it to Sören's lips. Sören not only accepted the strawberry, but then he licked and sucked the berry juices and cream from Dooku's fingers, eyes locked with his.

Sören then readied a strawberry and fed it to Dooku. Dooku ate it, and then himself sucked on Sören's fingers, making Sören's cock stir in his boxer briefs. Sören could also feel that they were wet with precum, and his mind raced with he and Dooku sucking each other the way they were sucking on each other's fingers. But he held back, allowing Dooku to feed him another strawberry, and then he fed Dooku another strawberry.

There were a dozen big strawberries in the bowl, and when they got down to the last two, Sören only bit half of his strawberry and directed the other half to Dooku's mouth, and they kissed, sharing the strawberry between them. Then Sören "accidentally" dropped the last strawberry, with whipped cream, onto the part of Dooku's chest that was exposed with the pajama top.

"Oops, clumsy me," Sören said, leaning in to eat the strawberry off his chest, and then lap up the cream and juices from his flesh and chest hair, as Dooku groaned.

Sören couldn't hold back anymore, and his fingers tore at the silk of Dooku's pajama top, which tore with a satisfying ripping sound. With Dooku's chest exposed, Sören took the last of the whipped cream and poured it over the bare chest, cleaning it with his tongue. When Dooku's chest was licked clean, all the cream gone, Dooku grabbed Sören by the curls and pulled his face up so they could kiss, and Dooku grabbed one of Sören's hands and brought it down to the hard cock straining in his pajama bottoms.

Sören ripped those, too, and Dooku groaned as his cock sprung free. Sören immediately dove down and took Dooku's cock into his mouth, sucking it slowly, savoring, as he watched Dooku's reactions, his own cock throbbing at the way Dooku trembled and moaned, Dooku's hands reaching to pull on his curls.

"Mmmmmmmm," Sören moaned with his mouth full. He took the cock out of his mouth and gave it a few slow, teasing licks. "I saved the tastiest dessert for last." With that, his tongue began to lash the slit, lapping up salty-sweet precum.

He resumed sucking, nice and slow, going a little faster, and faster, as Dooku's moans got louder. When Dooku was panting and gently thrusting into his mouth, and Sören could feel how close he was, Sören stopped and just licked around the head, licked up and down the shaft and back to the head, tongue rubbing the sensitive frenulum, then the slit, making a show of collecting the flow of precum with his tongue. Then Sören licked his lips, sat up, and took down his boxer briefs. Dooku moaned at the sight of Sören's hard cock, flushed a deep pink and dripping precum.

There was, of course, a small bottle of lubricant on the end table, and Sören used the Force to pick it up and carry it over, then he opened it and let the Force turn the bottle over, pouring lubricant directly onto Dooku's cock as Sören leaned in and kissed him, hands caressing Dooku's chest, enjoying the silky-yet-rough feel of the silver chest hair. "You're so sexy, Daddy," Sören teased before licking along Dooku's jaw, tongue in his beard, then kissing and licking Dooku's neck, knowing how much he liked that. As Sören continued kissing and licking Dooku's neck and shoulder, Sören's hand reached between them, stroking Dooku's cock to work the lube over him.

When they were both ready, Sören sat on Dooku's lap, facing him, and sank down, slowly, their eyes locked. All of the pain of what they lost, and what could have been, melted away for those moments as Dooku filled him, claimed him, possessed him, the two become one. Sören's arms locked around him and he began to ride, and now it was Dooku's turn to kiss and lick Sören's neck, then his throat, down over his collarbone to his nipples, lapping, suckling, nibbling, tugging the nipple rings with his teeth before suckling again, harder. Dooku's fingers were in Sören's mouth, stifling the moans and cries as Sören lost himself in pleasure, feeling the curve of Dooku's cock rub inside him just right, Dooku's other hand stroking his cock. Nothing existed except sensation... and connection.

"Daddy's here, sweetheart." Dooku kissed Sören's heart, and slipped his fingers out of Sören's mouth to touch his face. "Winter is here, and Daddy will keep you warm."

Sören's arms tightened around him, riding harder. "Pabbi," he husked.

"Yes, *elskan.*" They kissed.

It didn't take much longer for them to get there, shuddering against each other, gasping between feverish kisses. When that moment came their eyes locked and Dooku said, "Come for Daddy," and Sören threw back his head and cried out, "Daddy, Pabbi!" as his seed spent over the silver pelt on Dooku's chest. A few seconds later Dooku was undone, a deep growling groan as he erupted into Sören. They kissed again, and it seemed for a minute that the inside of the canopy was glowing with brilliant white light, not the fairy lights and the lanterns and the moon, but the energy they'd raised between them...

...and Sören thought of the Silmarils, the living testament to the love he shared with Fingolfin, with Finarfin, with Maglor. They were more than just jewels, but each held a piece of his soul. A piece of that love, that passion, the Flame Imperishable within him ignited by the power of love.

Even in the winter of their grief, their love was the invincible summer that sustained them. Sören started to cry, the intensity of his orgasm and the intensity of his love shattering him, needing to let it out.

"It's all right." Dooku kissed Sören's tears. "It's going to be all right."

Sören nodded. He thought of the Silmarils... thought of the forge... thought of his idea of a vacation home in Scandinavia, possibly Norway, where his ancestors had lived before coming to Iceland in the 1500s. "We have a lot of work ahead of us." Their eyes met. "*I* have a lot of work to do."

"We'll get there," Dooku said, taking Sören's hands and squeezing. "But tonight, on this longest night, we play."

With that, Dooku took Sören's face in his, and lay back against the pillows, pulling Sören down with him. Sören smiled as he felt Dooku's cock hardening up in him again and kissed him back, fingers walking up Dooku's chest as he began to roll his hips, fingers resting on Dooku's heart as they kissed again.

Chapter 25

"You know what?"

Anthony and Sören were both winded after their Krav practice - Fridays were their day for "Force enhanced" Krav, where they worked on using the Force to throw and hit and choke each other, and disarm each other and break free of grips. It was a lot more exhausting than not using the Force... and arousing. Even now, as they were calming down from the adrenaline rush, Sören's eyes still had a feral look to them, and Anthony *hungered.*

Sören shook his head as he uncapped his water bottle. "No, what?" He took a swig, and as his lips wrapped around the neck of the water bottle Anthony's mind went into the gutter, thinking about those full lips wrapped around the head of his cock.

Anthony was tempted to grab Sören, kiss him, and say *That's what,* but he didn't. He couldn't. *Dammit.* Anthony made himself focus, thinking about their after-Krav run. "I think you're ready to try running to Bronte."

They had been running every day from Bondi Beach to Tamarama and back, and Sören was making real progress, able to go the entire way with only needing to take the one rest stop, at Tamarama, and not getting as ragged as he was when they first started. Anthony wouldn't be pushing Sören if he didn't think Sören was ready, but he could sense Sören having a moment of doubt, hesitating.

Then Sören nodded. "OK. I'll try."

"That's the spirit." Anthony patted him on the back.

It was a cool but sunny day, and Anthony was in a good enough mood that he put the windows down and cranked the stereo up on the way to his apartment complex. Every now and again Anthony stole a glance at Sören, his curls blowing in the breeze, and his heart ached. He once again internally kicked himself. *Stop mooning over him.*

But the heart wanted what it wanted. It was getting worse all the time, and Anthony still couldn't bring himself to terminate the assignment, find someone to replace him, and go crawling back to London.

They walked out to Bondi Beach, and stretched together. Then they started their run, all the way to Tamarama. At Tamarama they took a short break to admire the view at the beach, the sun sparkling on the water. Anthony led them in another round of stretching, and they were off to Bronte.

Sören looked a little panicked as they started - Anthony once again could sense how much Sören was doubting himself, all the memories of being a weak, unathletic kid rushing back - but underneath all that fear was *steel*. Sören was determined, and Anthony was fiercely proud of him. "There you go," Anthony said a few minutes into the run. "You're doing great."

Sören flashed a smile at him, and that smile was as dazzling as the sun on the waves, making Anthony's heart skip a beat. Anthony stopped himself from saying: *I love you.* Unshed tears burned in his eyes.

He knew he had fallen for Sören, but he loved Sören even more now. Sören's life had gone up in flames at the end of last year and he had been demoralized for months, but now, like the phoenix inked on his skin, Sören was learning to fly. He was learning to *fight back*, reborn as a bird of prey... and Anthony loved him for that.

Tamarama was halfway between Bondi and Bronte, and though Anthony felt Sören was ready for it, he still knew it was a bit of a challenge, and when they did make it to Bronte, Sören was out of breath and had to sit down. Anthony let Sören catch his breath, and he watched Sören take it all in, seeing Bronte Beach for the first time. It was a small beach but popular, even on a winter's day there were tourists and locals soaking up the sun. Sören's eyes caught one of the two rock pools, the man-made one known as the "bogey hole", and people swimming in it.

"There's some rip out here too, known as the Bronte Express" Anthony explained, "so that's there for people who want to swim safely."

"It kind of reminds me of, ah, the Nature Baths at Lake Mývatn," Sören said, and Anthony saw a mental image of Sören and Dooku in a hot spring, kissing under the aurora borealis. Sören scowled at the pool. "Obviously it's, you know, not the same. But..." Sören sighed. "I haven't gone swimming outside of the pool at our place, in a long time."

The thought of both of them in swim trunks, in close proximity to each other in the water, was delicious... and dangerous. Anthony bit his lower lip. "Well, if you want to swim here one of these days, we could do that. Maybe next week, or the week after?"

"Maybe the week after," Sören said, nodding. "I feel like I'm gonna die just running here one way, never mind running here, taking a swim, and running back. I need to work my way up to it. But... ah. It would be nice. Looks like people are enjoying the water, like it's not too cold. Not that cold water really bothers me, where I'm from and all, but..."

"OK. Something we should plan in advance when you're more used to this course." Anthony still didn't think he'd be ready for that, feeling like his balls would explode around Sören in swim trunks. As it was, seeing Sören in just boxers on Sunday was bad enough; Anthony had masturbated a record number of times since then. His cock was starting to stir at the mere thought of it, all over again.

"Besides..." Sören cocked his head to one side. "Ari and Harrison are coming and maybe we could take them. Harrison runs, and he drags Ari running with him, so we could all run here, maybe."

Anthony breathed a tiny sigh of relief. Being around other people and being expected to be sociable and in a show-the-tourists-around state of mind would probably make his awareness of Sören mostly-naked less acute. At least then. They would still likely have subsequent visits where it was just the two of them.

"It's pretty out here." Sören looked around again. "Very... poetic, even with all the people around. I imagine it would be prettier at a time when there's less people, like sunrise, or after dark."

Anthony nodded. He loved Sören's accent, and he especially loved the way Sören said "poetic" with his accent. He tried to stay nonchalant, even as he was feeling stupidly giddy. "I've been going for a second run in the evening, since you don't go as far as I do and I need to make up the distance, and it's not as crowded at sunset or in the evening. Maybe we could go later, sometime, too, watch the sunset together." *Oh god, that sounds*

like I'm asking him on a bloody date.

Their eyes met. "I'd like that."

Fuck. "Me too." Anthony bit his lower lip again, his cheeks on fire.*Bugger. Shit. It's not a date. Not a date. NOT A DATE...*

After Sören had rested a few minutes longer, Anthony led him on a walk along the beach. They walked in companionable silence - Anthony fought the urge to take his hand - and they paused a moment, watching the waves. Anthony breathed in the salt air, feeling his muscles relax. He watched Sören breathe too, looking pleased with the smell of the sea.

"I kind of wish the kids were with us, so I had an excuse to play in the sand." Sören smiled.

Anthony chuckled. "I'd offer, but sand gets into everything, I'd be cleaning sand out of my flat for the next fortnight."

Sören laughed too. "There are worse things."

"Maybe. Doesn't help I'm not used to it." Anthony glanced over at Sören. "My parents used to take me on holiday in Brighton and my mum still has a vacation house there, I've used it once or twice a year the last couple of decades... and the beaches there are all rocky. No sand. I saw sand for the first time when I went to the Gulf." *I saw a lot of things for the first time when I went to the Gulf,* Anthony thought to himself bitterly.

"Reynisfjara, in the south of Iceland... has black sand. It's a magical place. It's where I found..." And then Sören's voice trailed off and he covered his mouth, like he said something he shouldn't have.

Anthony raised an eyebrow, to try to prompt him to go on, but Sören wouldn't, looking back out at sea again. Anthony felt vaguely annoyed - what he didn't know, could hinder his ability to protect Sören and his family - but he wasn't going to press it. He did wish Sören felt more comfortable telling him things, but then, if he'd had a sibling who'd been taken by god-knows-who, and a partner who had been tortured by the American government during the 1970s for information about what he was and where he came from, he'd probably be wary of talking about things too.

Sören quickly changed the subject, as if he sensed Anthony's discomfort with him not continuing that thought. "So this beach... Bronte beach. Was it named for the sisters?"

"No," Anthony said. "It was named for Vice-Admiral Horatio Nelson, Duke of Bronte. I know that because I thought it was the case too, and then I looked it up." Anthony perked up a little. "You've read the Bronte sisters?"

"Only Charlotte and Emily, only *Jane Eyre* and *Wuthering Heights*, but *Jane Eyre* is one of my favorite books." Sören folded his arms. "I related a little too much to Jane."

"I'm surprised you've read it," Anthony said.

"Why, because it's in English? You'd be surprised what we read, then, we love books -" Sören looked around nervously, even though there weren't many people within earshot and he was keeping his voice down, Anthony knew "we" meant Icelanders and Sören was trying to be circumspect about that in public, considering he had assumed a Danish identity with his relocation.

"That's... not it," Anthony said. "It's, well." Anthony gave a nervous chuckle. "Your age. A lot of people don't read anymore, or at least, don't read old books."

"Well, I mean, just because literature is *old* doesn't mean it's better. I fucking hate Jane Austen." Sören made a face. "Posh bourgie bullshit, no, *takk.* But, like I said, we do a lot of reading where I'm from, and I was always reading as a kid. My uncle Einar thought I read too much, actually. He was a real asshole about it."

Anthony reached out and put his hand on Sören's shoulder, his fingers and arm tingling, his body aching to hold Sören, pet him, kiss him, fire scorching away all those bad memories. But he restrained himself. "I got picked on for reading a lot, myself, not by my parents, but by kids."

Sören nodded. "That's part of why I got bullied, too. It's ironic because those same people who picked on me in school claim to be such avid readers now, probably, but it was one more weird thing about me when I was growing up. Anyway... books were one of the ways I escaped. And art. What's your favorite old book, anyway? One of the Bronte sisters?"

"No, although I enjoy both of the books you mentioned," Anthony said. He felt weirdly self-conscious admitting to this, but he decided just to go ahead and say it. "As far as old books goes, I read *Moby Dick* a lot when I was commanding a sub."

Sören snorted and shook with silent laughter.

Anthony facepalmed, realizing Sören had gone there. "Oh *god.*"

"You said dick," Sören said, his laughter no longer silent.

Anthony laughed too. "Goddammit, Sören..."

"Yes, I know, the book is very serious business. *Moby Dick*, which is neither about Moby nor his dick."

Anthony facepalmed again, laughing harder. "You're terrible."

"And you're not?"

Anthony knew he was... and being around Sören made it even worse. Once again, his mind was going right into the gutter, thinking of Sören's cock... *Fuck.* He looked away and out to sea, but out of the corner of his eye he saw Sören smiling and he kept stealing glances. It was so good to see Sören smiling and laughing, after weeks of being troubled.

He wondered how long that would last, how long before trouble resurfaced. He didn't like that he was wondering that. When he'd wondered like that when he was in the service, it was usually before something did happen.

Sören's voice cut into his thoughts. "So... who's your favorite author? And what's your favorite book? You've got me curious now."

"Of all time?"

Sören nodded.

Anthony didn't even have to think about it. "My favorite author is Ursula K. Le Guin, and my favorite book is one of hers, *The Lathe of Heaven*. It's about a man whose dreams can change reality, so his psychiatrist starts working with him and a machine to enhance his abilities, and he keeps on creating new alternate realities that sound good in theory but don't work out so well in practice. Trying to create peace on Earth, for instance, results in an alien invasion of the moon that gets all nations united to fight the threat. That sort of thing."

"Interesting."

The way Sören said that word, and the uneasiness Anthony sensed, made Anthony wonder what else Sören was holding back on telling him. He remembered Sören saying that the two non-humans who had semi-recently left this world via one of the portals had come from... Asgard. If myths were real, the world was much stranger than he thought.

"What's your favorite author? And book?" Anthony didn't want to dwell on what Sören knew and wasn't telling him. He had a feeling he didn't want to find out, and was going to eventually find out anyway - much like when he'd seen the djinn in the Middle East, something that had shaken him, an atheist, to his core.

"Stephen King, and his book *The Stand.* Engineered flu virus escapes a lab, kills most of the population, the survivors have interesting dreams that lead them into one of two camps." Sören chuckled and rubbed his beard, looking even more uneasy than Anthony had sensed he'd felt just a moment ago. "We read really lighthearted, cheerful things apparently." He was obviously being sarcastic.

"Apparently. Though I would have taken you for someone who reads more erotica." As soon as the words came out of Anthony's mouth he wished he hadn't said it, feeling like that made his interest in Sören even more obvious and awkward.

Sören threw his head back and laughed, not bothered by it at all. "There isn't exactly a lot of decent gay male erotica novels in publication. Unless you count Chuck Tingle decent."

Anthony snickered. He'd never read Chuck Tingle but he'd heard of him; Chuck Tingle was pretty infamous.

"There is plenty of, ah, slash fanfic, but that's different," Sören said.

"Sounds like you have some experience reading it."

"Well, I got exposed to fanfic because my cousin Ari writes Tolkien fanfic. He's had me read a few things, asked for feedback. My helpful feedback is usually asking stuff like 'When do they fuck?'" Sören grinned, though Anthony could feel the touch of sadness, missing his cousin. "But no, I don't read anything like, ah... *Pounded In the Butt.* Or *Fifty Shades of Grey.* Which sounds like it should have a crossover, *Pounded In the Butt By Fifty Shades of Grey.*"

Anthony laughed harder, his face on fire. He already liked Sören even more now that he knew Sören read books, and now his sense of humor was coming out to play again, one of the things Anthony found the most attractive about him. "My mum said she read *Fifty Shades* to see what everyone was on about and couldn't get halfway through the book."

"It's garbage. It started off as *Twilight* fanfic, which, itself is garbage. It seems to really only be tolerable if there's fanfic of the fanfic. And probably crossovers, like *Pounded In the Butt*. Or *Fifty Shades of Jurassic Park.* Hell, it would make Jane Austen more tolerable

to combine the two, *Fifty Shades of Pride and Prejudice.* Or even an Ayn Rand crossover, *Fifty Shades of Atlas*, where capitalism fucks you *literally*."

Anthony wanted to kiss him again. "*Pounded In the Butt By Fifty Shades of Atlas*"

"Someone should write this."

A few minutes later when they calmed down, Sören asked, “Should we head back?” Anthony could feel he was still a little tired and reluctant to run back.

"We can walk back if you need to, today," Anthony said.

Sören shook his head. "I think I can do it. I want to try, anyway. Though, I'm not going to object if we stay here a little while longer." Sören looked up at the sky, and out at the sparkling waves, and breathed in the salt air again. Then Sören turned and looked around at the beach - Anthony saw him looking at the caves - and at last Sören noticed the cafes near the beach.

Anthony felt like rewarding Sören for his willingness to try and run, when he knew how uncomfortable it was for him at first. "Would you like to stop at a cafe and get some coffee, or something? I'll treat."

After a few seconds, Sören nodded, looking a little shy about it. "*Takk.*" He crinkled his nose and bit his lower lip.

Anthony *really* wanted to kiss him now, and cursed under his breath as he led Sören in the direction of a cafe where he'd been before, that not only had good coffee but also nice gelato and Italian ice. Sören's face lit up again as soon as he saw the selection, like a big kid, and it made Anthony smile too.

After waiting in the queue, Anthony ordered what he'd had here a few times before. "One large hazelnut latte, please."

The young lady behind the counter looked at Anthony, then at Sören, and asked, "And what'll your boyfriend have?"

Anthony's eyebrows shot up, his face on fire. He wanted to melt into the floor. He knew, of course, that despite their run-in with neonazis in May, Sydney was a fairly progressive city, and the younger "zoomer" generation was fairly accepting in a way that was refreshing to Anthony, who had come of age in the 1990s when it wasn't a good time to be openly gay. Nonetheless, he was still taken aback, more because he and Sören *weren't* dating and it wasn't the first time they had been assumed to be a couple. Anthony wondered how obvious it was to the world that he fancied Sören Sigurðsson. He opened his mouth, debating whether or not he should correct the woman and say *he's not my boyfriend*, but Sören just ordered, like he wasn't ruffled by it. "A large frozen vanilla chai, and, ah..." Sören looked at the Italian ice menu again. "A vanilla Italian ice, *takk.*"

As the woman got their order ready, she smiled at Sören. "Where are you from, luv?"

"Denmark," Sören said without missing a beat. Anthony exhaled, glad that Sören didn't slip and say "Iceland". Then he felt Sören's prickle of irritation - not with the woman behind the counter who was just being friendly, but with the situation itself, having to lie about where he was from.

"I love your accent," the woman said.

"I like yours too," Sören said. "Australian accents are nice."

The woman laughed. "Thanks, mate." She gave Sören an extra scoop of Italian ice with a wink. Sören looked at the tip jar and put in a twenty-dollar note.

When their drinks and Sören's Italian ice was ready they got a table by the window - Anthony was amazed that a window seat cleared when the place was so busy on a Friday afternoon, but then, Anthony tended to have good luck with both parking places and tables, which he realized probably wasn't luck at all but a minor manifestation of his Force abilities. Sören began to work on his Italian ice, which was disconcerting because of how much it involved his tongue, and Anthony wondering what exactly Sören could do with that tongue, and then Sören covered his mouth, made a high-pitched noise, and started shaking with laughter.

"What?" Anthony asked.

"It's vanilla ice," Sören said.

Anthony had to. "All right, stop." Then he continued, "Collaborate and listen..."

People at a nearby table gave them a look, which just made them laugh harder. "I'm surprised you even remember that," Anthony said.

"I was..." Sören did the mental math. "Seven or eight when he got popular. My brother and I actually practiced our English with that song, and..." Sören started laughing again. "He did the dance, even the push-ups and stuff, and he looked so stupid, and he'd kill me if I told people this. He was mad because he couldn't get his hair cut like Vanilla Ice."

Anthony was trying to picture little Dagnýr Sigurðsson, the famous astrophysicist, as a wannabe Vanilla Ice, and it was breaking his brain. "Wow. Just... wow."

"Word to your motha," Sören said.

Anthony snorted. Then he had a pang of guilt because he hadn't called his mother in two weeks, and he was overdue. He was surprised she hadn't called yet, worried because he hadn't called. He made a mental note to call her later.

Then his eyes met Sören's and he could feel how much Sören missed his brother, how intensely sad that loss made him. Anthony wanted to get up and give him a hug, but didn't. He knew Sören didn't want to break down crying here in public, so he took a cue from something he thought Sören would do if their situations were reversed - Anthony took a straw from the straw dispenser at their table, peeled down the wrapper, and then blew into it, firing the wrapper at Sören's nose.

"That was adult," Sören said.

"Thank you."

Sören smiled, and kicked him under the table. Anthony kicked him back.

They had a few moments of peace, with Sören working on his Italian ice and his frozen vanilla chai, and Anthony sipping his hazelnut coffee, as they looked out the window at the beach and the ocean. It really did feel like they were on a date, and of course they

weren't. Anthony began thinking about asking Sören on a date for real, while he was also arguing with himself that it was a terrible idea, and they could not cross that line.

Mercifully, Sören's voice broke into his thoughts again. "So, Anthony, I've been thinking about something."

Oh shit. It's a date, isn't it. Anthony didn't know whether he wanted to jump up and down or run.

But then Sören said, "I... want to build an extension on the house, and I'm going to need a contractor. You gave us a list of repair people and other services who are, ah, approved by your people, I guess, but... nothing like that."

"Probably because we weren't expecting you to build an extension on the house." Anthony felt both curious and vaguely irritated at once. "What are you looking to do?"

"A forge," Sören said.

"A... forge." Anthony cocked his head to one side. "Like... smithing?"

"Já. Blacksmithing."

Anthony knew Sören painted, and made pottery, but there was no evidence of blacksmithing at his old studio in Akureyri, nothing about it in his case file. "Black...smithing? Since when do you blacksmith?"

"Since now," Sören said. "I need a forge built in a timely manner, so if you can give me contact info for a contractor..."

"Well, I can," Anthony said, though he was going to have to check in with MI6 because he didn't know off the top of his head - he was sure MI6 did have a file on those sorts of professionals in Sydney and other places. "But the bigger issue is, blacksmithing. You're just going to... build a forge... and start smithing. Don't you need to take classes? I don't want you burning the house down -"

"I know what I'm doing," Sören gritted out, and slurped noisily at his frozen chai.

Anthony didn't think so, but then something about that statement - the ferocity behind it - told Anthony that Sören probably did and in any case he had better stay the hell out of Sören Sigurðsson's way and just get him a damn contractor. "I'll talk to my people later and get you that info before the end of the day."

"Good."

Anthony realized where the vague prickle of irritation was coming from. "My mum built that house, you know. It was on the market when I had to find a house for you, and I took it as a sign."

"You told me that and I forgot." Sören sighed. "I hope you're not offended that I want to build on it. It's not meant as a slight against your mum. The house is perfectly nice, even if I was a little uncomfortable with it when I moved in because it's... so big. Though it turns out we needed something that big, to accommodate everyone."

And that was the tip of the iceberg of the irritation. Anthony had in fact taken the appearance of his mother's design on the housing market as a sign... and now it seemed

like other signs had come up, all pointing to it somehow being fated that his path had crossed with Sören's. That *bothered* him. It was one thing to be Force sensitive, and another thing to feel like he was being moved across a board like a chess piece for some sort of cosmic game. He didn't like that feeling, even as he liked Sören himself. And Sören's family, too, feeling like he was becoming part of the family.

And then Sören was snickering again, and Anthony picked up on why.*"It's so big. We needed something that big to accommodate everyone."*

"Oh my *god*." Anthony facepalmed. "Why are you like this."

Sören grinned into his frozen chai.

Anthony kicked him under the table, and Sören kicked him back. Then Sören started playing footsie with him under the table.

They weren't on a date, but they were definitely playing with fire. It wasn't just Sören's house that Anthony worried about burning down, but his own heart. His own life.

Chapter 26

Sören absolutely was not a morning person, but he made himself get up in the mornings to tend to his children, do his daily workout routine on the pole, and prepare for his run with Anthony. Now a forge was being built as an extension on the house, and part of Sören's morning routine involved taking the kids in a stroller, Huan on the leash, and going for a little walk around the property to casually supervise the construction. He did this after his pole workout, while he was still a bit sore from stretching his muscles, but was pushing himself just a little more with the walk.

As he walked and paused to watch the work on the extension, Sören heard a car pull up. It was a bit soon for Anthony to show up, though he had been known to arrive early on occasion, and Sören's heart skipped a beat, sort of hoping it was him. *Stop that,* Sören told himself, annoyed with himself for the bounce in his step, the heat in his cheeks at the mere thought of seeing Anthony. *You're like a fucking lovesick teenager again.*

But it wasn't Anthony - Sören reached out with the Force and he felt Frankie's Force energy, like swords of fire cutting through ice. Since they hadn't made plans, Sören felt a twinge of alarm, wondering what was going on, and he took Huan and the girls around to the back entrance. He came in as Frankie was ringing the doorbell. "I'll be right there," Sören called.

Sören used the Force to open the door, since nobody could really see what was going on other than them, and it was faster than waiting to get there. Frankie waddled in - she was very, very pregnant now; it was July sixth and she was due this month - and Sören parked the stroller, let Huan loose, and made a beeline for the kitchen as Frankie sat down. "Hey, *elskan.* You want anything? Coffee, tea, lemonade..."

"Lemonade sounds good, thanks."

Sören brought over lemonade for each of them. He gingerly sat next to Frankie and put an arm around her. For a moment they drank in companionable silence and then Sören pulled Frankie's head onto his shoulder, and kept an arm around her while his other hand reached to gently rub her huge belly in slow, lazy circles. "So... are you OK? Is everything all right?"

"Yes. Well... no, but yes." Frankie scowled. "Why do you always assume something is catastrophically wrong whenever you see me, anymore?"

*Because I have recurring nightmares about you burning to death.*Sören swallowed hard and patted her belly. "I'm sorry. I'm not trying to, ah, infantilize you. I just worry about you, and didn't know if you came over because something's wrong..."

"I did come over for a reason," Frankie said, "but I don't know whether you would classify whether it was wrong or not."

Sören was completely confused, and he braced himself, not knowing what to expect, only getting the feeling that it was non-trivial, since Frankie had come in the morning and she knew he didn't like mornings. Frankie took a deep breath and, as if she knew he needed some sort of reassurance, she took his hand and kissed it before she put it back on her belly. "OK. Sören. I don't know how to song and dance around this issue so I'm just gonna

say it and I hope you won't hate me for it."

Sören's brow furrowed. *Oh shit, she's breaking up with me.*

But it wasn't that. Frankie went on, "Ever since Flóki left, I've been kind of a mess... and Margrét's been kind of a mess... and she and I have been kind of a mess together, and... what I'm trying to say is, I know you and I had talked about sharing custody of the baby, but..." Frankie met his eyes, her own too bright. She squared her jaw and her shoulders - Sören could feel how hard this was for her, even though she was set in feeling this was the right thing for everyone involved. "I think you should have full custody. It doesn't mean I don't want to be involved in the baby's life at all, I'd like to visit, but I think you should raise him, her, them. I... I don't think I'm in the right place mentally to do it, and... you know Margrét had a vasectomy years ago because she didn't think she was in the right place to be a parent -"

"I was there," Sören said, nodding. "I went with her for moral support."

"And she was prepared to deal with it for my sake... before Flóki left. Now, I feel like we'd just be adding strain and things are already broken enough. I'm sorry, I know you already have the girls and I feel like I'm evading responsibility, but -"

Sören pulled Frankie close and let her fall apart on him. He could feel how she had been trying to hold back the tears and be "strong" about this, but it finally broke. And he understood. There was no anger, no judgment, only compassion. Sören's arms tightened around her and he rubbed and patted her back. "Shhhhhh, Frankie."

"I'm so sorry," Frankie choked out. "I feel like I failed you, I feel like I failed the baby -"

Sören picked up Frankie's chin and made her look him in the eye. "Listen. I'd rather know now, before the baby gets here. I'm not gonna lie, I had been pretty set in the idea that we would share custody and pass the baby back and forth every week or couple weeks or so, but... I can adjust. I can deal. And the guys can deal."

"I feel like I'm overloading you." Frankie sniffled and more tears spilled down her cheeks. "You already have *twins* to take care of, I know that's a lot..."

Sören shrugged. "It is what it is. It's not like I don't have help between Nico and Maglor and Ali and Kenny. And Frankie... as far as responsibility goes, I think that it *is* being responsible to admit 'I can't handle this' and give the duty to someone who *can* rather than taking it out of a sense of duty and not being able to give the child what it needs. OK? You didn't know me right after Maglor left, he'd been out of my life a year or so before you and I met, but let me tell you, that first year I was a fucking *wreck*. There is NO way in hell I would have been able to handle what fell into my lap with Dag's kids, if he'd had them sooner and shit hit the fan in 2014. No fucking way. So I get it. I really do." He pulled her close again and kissed the top of her head.

"So... it's OK?" Frankie continued to shake and sob. "You don't hate me?"

"*God*, no. I still love you. I still want to be there for you. I still want you involved in our child's life *as you can be*, but like I said, I get it that you can't be custodial parent. I... I can do it." Sören did feel slightly daunted at the prospect of now having three small children to take care of, especially when their enemies were at large - he thought of his parents, with their three children, both killed by Odin - but he was willing to accept the challenge.

"OK." Frankie sniffled. Sören used the Force to pass her a box of tissues.

He got up to get them more lemonade, thinking about the full repercussions as he worked in the kitchen. He would have to talk with Dooku and Maglor, though he knew them well enough to know they wouldn't have an issue with it. Then he thought about Anthony, and before he could start internally kicking himself again for having Anthony Hewlett-Johnson on the brain, he knew his brain had brought him up because Anthony would of course need to know about additions to the household, and...

"One thing," Sören said as he sat down. "This isn't to be a dick, but... we're going to need more than an oral contract."

Frankie had chosen that moment to take a sip of lemonade and she almost choked. "I thought you like oral, Sören."

Sören snickered and rolled his eyes - usually he was the perverted one, grasping at levity, but then, that was why he and Frankie had been friends for so long. "You know what I mean. We're going to need some sort of legally binding agreement, where you give up parental rights and I agree not to come after you for child support and... all that shit." Sören ran a nervous hand through his curls and rubbed his beard, feeling uncomfortable at even bringing that up - he didn't expect any sort of legal problems with Frankie about it, it wasn't that he didn't trust her word. "Anthony's going to get on our case about it, needing a paper trail in case we have to move again, or..." He really hoped they wouldn't have to move again anytime soon; Anthony had suggested they stay in Sydney until the girls were legal adults and Sören was fine with that. And he knew if the sudden move had shaken him up, it had to be worse for Maglor, who had moved around and around and around for ages; Sören knew Maglor liked the idea of staying put in Sydney even more than he did.

"That's fine," Frankie said, nodding. "Also, thank you for not asking for child support. I *would* give some if you asked me - I do want to be able to do some things for the kid -"

Sören shook his head. "We're set for life. I know MI6 gave you guys some money but it's not like the sort of money we have, from *that fuck*." He still couldn't say the name aloud. "I don't need your money."

"OK, but if I want to give a gift -"

"That's different. Just... don't overdo it." Sören wagged a finger at her. "Seriously. Don't let guilt make you spend money you don't have."

Frankie sighed.

Sören booped her nose. He decided to change the subject from money, since he knew that would always be a bit of a sore spot with her - like him, she'd come from a working-class background. He went back to the loose ends involved with the new custodial arrangement. "I'm going to assume that if you're giving up parental rights, you're going to let me choose the name without putting up a fight."

Frankie nodded. "Yeah, just don't name him, like, Captain Underpants or something ridiculous -"

"No." Sören couldn't resist. "I was going to name him Captainunderpantsorsomethingridiculousfinwë."

Now Frankie spluttered her drink and fell over on Sören. "Goddammit, Sören..."

"Sorry." Sören grinned. He wasn't.

"You're not sorry at all." Frankie tweaked his nose.

"I mean, Captainunderpantsorsomethingridiculousfinwë is still better than our dear brother's choice of *Hair Commander*."

Frankie gigglesnorted. "No it's not." She facepalmed, still laughing. "You're never going to let that go, are you?"

"When Nico chose immortality, he chose thousands of years for me to take the piss out of him endlessly over Hair Commander." And then Sören winced, remembering that, of course, everyone else he loved who wasn't Dooku or Maglor was going to die, because the gods had left, taking their blood and their offer with them. Sören hated thinking about it, but there it was again. Sören quickly pushed that thought away before it could make him sad, knowing Frankie would feel it, and he felt she'd already been upset enough for one day.

"So... you want to choose the name without my input. That's fine." Frankie nodded. "Anything else?"

"I know we were thinking about picking out godparents together, and, you're due in a couple weeks and we still don't have godparents."

"Yeah that... hasn't been a priority. Just trying to get through each day -"

"I know." Sören kissed her brow and touched her face. He patted her. "Anyway, because of how I ended up with Dag's kids, uh... I'd feel better picking out a godmother or godfather, someone who can take them if..." He didn't want to finish that sentence. While Ingwion's blood had given him immortality, that only made him stop aging, made him hardier... it didn't make him completely immune to death. He thought of the Dagorath he'd felt in another universe, the full-strength Fëanor, godlike, had not been able to prevent his own end; that didn't bode well for his odds here with Ragnarök or anything afterwards. *I need someone I trust, who's not on Odin's immediate shitlist.* That narrowed down the choices significantly.

"That's fine too." Frankie frowned. "I wish I could volunteer to take full custody if..." She didn't want to finish that sentence either, but.

"No, I mean... it's OK." *And I need someone who isn't getting killed repeatedly in my nightmares.* If something happened to him and Frankie took the child and something happened to her... Sören shivered, even though it wasn't particularly cold.

—

The conversation weighed heavily on Sören's mind during shooting practice and the run, and though Sören was still fine with the arrangement, and not upset with Frankie herself, he found himself getting angry at Flóki all over again for abandoning Frankie and his sister, and wondered if things would be different if Flóki had stayed. Of course, Sören felt that it was probably better they found out Flóki was like that, but he knew it was still awful for Frankie and Margrét.

Getting angry with Flóki and Ingwion all over again made Sören think about the threat of Odin again, and how even with getting stronger, preparing himself to be able to fight, he still felt outclassed and like he was biting off more than he could chew with Odin and the Valar both. A part of Sören wondered if it was selfish for him to bring a child into this world at all - even without having made an enemy of multiple gods, the world was an increasingly scary place, and Sören wondered how much worse it would be for the girls when they were adults. He was still looking forward to the new arrival, and yet he couldn't shake the feeling that he'd made a terrible mistake by having a child in these times.

Or maybe once the gods are gone - or some of them - humanity might do better without their influence.

Sören wanted to believe that, but he felt pessimistic. The girls were sensitive to the shifts in his moods, even as Sören tried to keep himself shielded, and soon they were squalling. They were still squalling when Ali walked in.

"You OK?" Ali's brow furrowed.

Sören knew it was useless to lie to her. "Not really."

Ali made the "give it" gesture. Sören passed over Kate and Ali began rocking her, humming softly. After a couple of minutes Kate calmed down, and when she was tucked in, Ali did the same with Tori. Then Sören watched Kate and Tori resting, peaceful again, and looked at each other before Ali asked, "What happened?"

Sören leaned back in his chair. "Frankie came over and said she wants me to have full custody of the baby."

Ali nodded slowly. "Awhile back I had a conversation with Frankie where she wondered if she would... you know, be an OK parent with her mental state and everything that happened. I tried to be reassuring but truthfully, I'm not surprised she came to this decision."

"Yeah. I told her I'm not mad at her... but this is still a lot."

Ali nodded again. "Yeh, I imagine it would be. Getting one more kid is a bit more work than getting one more cat. But we're all here for you, OK?"

Sören tried to smile. He swallowed hard, feeling a bit nervous with what he was about to ask, even though Ali was family. "Jæja, Frankie and I need to get a lawyer to... draw up the custodial agreement. I told her I don't want child support. I did say if she's giving me full custody, I also want the baby's name to be my full decision... and the godparent. I'm not Christian in any way - I'm Lutheran on paper but that's just, like, the state religion in Iceland, it doesn't mean anything..." Then Sören cringed, remembering he wasn't an Icelandic citizen anymore, Sören Sigurðsson technically didn't even exist anymore as far as Iceland was concerned. "Er, Denmark too, I suppose." It was still an adjustment to remember the Stefan Kierkegaard alias. He realized then the child was going to get the surname of Kierkegaard and not a Sörensson or Sörensdóttir patronymic, and that made Sören feel like throwing things or burning things down. He felt strange and a bit self-conscious for the flare of intense anger over something that trivial, but it felt like he had been *robbed*. It was another rude reminder of everything he'd lost, and that life would never go back to the way it once was; he couldn't go home to Iceland. He took a deep breath and strengthened his shielding, not wanting the girls to start screaming again. *Calm down. Get your shit together.* "Anyway, I'm not Christian but the thing with the godparent is... with Dag, it was who he wanted to have custody with his kids if something

happened to him, which, *as you know*, is how I ended up with the girls. So I also think it's a good idea to choose a godparent in case something happens to me, Nico, and Maglor." He looked Ali in the eye. "Will you be my child's godmother?"

Ali blinked.

Sören knew then that the answer was probably no, and he reflexively facepalmed, feeling like an idiot for asking - not sure what he'd done wrong, hoping he hadn't stepped on any toes.

Ali seemed to sense Sören sensed a no, and she leaned forward and took his hands, an attempt at trying to be reassuring that she wasn't angry with him for asking, but he still felt like he wanted to hide under the bed.

"I want to say yes," Ali said, "but..."

"You have to talk it over with Kenny? I was going to ask him to be godfather if you said yes..."

"It's not that," Ali said. She took a deep breath. "You know what I just said about acquiring one more kid being a lot more work than taking on one more cat?"

"Fuck, I'm sorry." Sören winced, realizing Ali had her hands full with Metallica and Megadeth. Then he felt the need to apologize further. "I hope you don't think I think of you as like... this expendable childcare person..."

"No," Ali said. "It's not that." She took a deep breath. "OK, Sören, look, I wasn't going to say anything about this before -"

Oh shit, what did I do. Sören realized he was probably being ridiculous - Ali tended to be *very* straightforward if she disliked something, but dealing with people like his abusive aunt, and many years later, his ex Justin, who seemed to expect him to anticipate their whims, had left its mark.

"Awhile back - in May, Kenny and I talked about trying for another baby. I'm not ready to make an announcement yet, but I think I'm pregnant. If that's true, I'll have three kids." Ali wrinkled her nose. "Or four, if my uterus decides to be a troll."

"Or five, if your uterus *really* wants to be a troll." Sören couldn't help himself.

Ali wagged her finger. "Watch it, you." She cackled, then she hugged herself, sobering a bit but with a little smile on her face. "I'm willing to be godmother and accept the responsibility of taking custody of the baby *if you can't get anyone else*, but it's going to be hard enough to be full-time parent to three kids, let alone four."

"I understand." Sören was excited and happy for her, though he couldn't help feeling a little disappointed by her saying no. There was exactly one other candidate on his list, and Sören wasn't sure they'd accept.

"So... do you have anyone else in mind to ask?" Ali raised her eyebrows, prompting him.

Sören nodded and looked down. "Anthony."

Ali laughed, then clapped her hand over her mouth, realizing that might be taken wrong. When she stopped laughing she nodded and said, "I was gonna suggest him, if you didn't

have any other candidates -"

"Oh god." Sören pinched the bridge of his nose. "I feel so fucking awkward about asking him. He's forty-one. He's never had any kids. He has a cat but that's really different. And I mean, he's an MI6 agent which isn't exactly the most stable life for child-rearing -"

"He wouldn't be the only MI6 agent in existence with a kid if he had to assume custodial duties for yours -"

"OK, James Bond having like fifty bastards around the world doesn't count," Sören said. Ali howled.

When they calmed down Ali said, "Plus, he's probably got family members who could help, if it came down to it. I know maybe you don't like the idea of strangers having a hand in raising your child, but if you're dead or too incapacitated -"

"I get it," Sören said; he didn't like thinking about the potential necessity of someone else taking custody of his child, even if he knew them.

"But I mean..." Ali cocked her head to one side. "He cares about you, Sören." She spoke into his mind *And I think you know what I mean by that.*She resumed speaking aloud. "I think he cares enough that he'd accept, even without prior experience with kids, even if the idea of being a parent is a bit strange for him, because it's *you.*"

Sören's heart fluttered, and then it sank again. He knew that his attraction to Anthony - his feelings for Anthony - were mutual; they couldn't hide that from each other very well. But Sören didn't like dwelling on that, even though Anthony was on his mind often... too much. He hadn't crossed that line because Anthony was *mortal*, and he didn't want to complicate Anthony's life more than it already was, and the thought of watching Anthony die tore at him. He felt the kindest thing he could do for Anthony and himself was keep Anthony at an arm's length and hope Anthony would find someone else and get over him. Ali's words - Ali knowing how they felt about each other - cut Sören to the quick, a reminder that it wasn't as easy as all of that to keep Anthony at a distance and not get more involved or attached. Every day the connection grew stronger, and with it, the temptation.

Things would get even more entangled if Sören asked Anthony to be the godfather of his child. That was not a bond easily broken, and it rather made Anthony a permanent fixture in Sören's life, for the rest of Anthony's mortal lifespan. If nothing else, even if Anthony got a new assignment from MI6 tomorrow that took him thousands of miles away, Anthony would still be around somewhat for the sake of the child. It was like asking Anthony to be a fourth dad.

This was assuming Anthony would even say yes - while Sören wanted to believe that Anthony would accept as a favor to someone he cared for deeply, Sören also knew Anthony was capable of saying "no" and indeed, might be uncomfortable with the whole thing, weirded out enough to need some space from Sören for awhile. While that might be the best thing long-term, since Sören knew their situation was hopeless, Sören also hated the thought of losing Anthony as a friend, and Anthony fading out of his life somehow.

"I really don't want to ask." Sören shifted his weight in his seat, feeling the urge to hide under the bed again.

"Sören." Ali pursed her lips, wagged her finger, and took the same tone with him that she took with Metallica and Megadeth when they didn't want to eat their vegetables. Sören tried not to laugh - this was no laughing matter - as his mind's eye played a memory of

Fëanor trying to get baby Maedhros to eat his vegetables and ending up wearing them, many times over. *I invented a style*, Fëanor had quipped, gesturing to his mashed-vegetable-stained frock. Somehow it seemed poetic justice that Maedhros would raise children that were also sort of hellions. Then his attention snapped back to Ali, fierce and uncompromising. "*You are being ridiculous.* What is the worst thing that could happen if you ask him?"

"He might think this is getting weird and ghost me."

Ali started laughing. "*Just now*, he would think this is getting weird. As opposed to what, knowing you're immortal and threw a god through a glass door and..."

"OK, you know what I mean, *Nelyafinwë.*"

"If you mean 'getting weird' in the 'too involved' sense, you guys hit that point about five fathoms ago. Seriously. He would kill for you, and I don't just mean as his job for MI6, I mean *personally*, he would commit murder for you... and I think he would die for you too, if it -"

"*Don't.*" Sören remembered his nightmare about Anthony mortally wounded.

"Sorry." Ali exhaled, and Sören knew she could see it in her mind's eye too.

Sören blinked back tears. Once again, he made himself get it together, not wanting to upset the girls.

"But," Ali went on, her tone softer, more gentle - yet still firm - "you don't exactly have a laundry list of people to ask. I would volunteer my parents as godparents, but you haven't met your uncle yet, and he's in his fifties and arthritis is slowing him down. Anthony is a more practical choice, for a lot of reasons."

"I don't want to ask him," Sören whined. "Like... I want him as godfather, yes, if nothing else I know he could protect the baby... but asking him just feels so awkward." Then Sören had a thought. "Since you're so hell bent on me asking him, you should go with me for moral support."

Ali gestured to herself with a confused look.

"Yes." Sören put a hand on his hip. "Why not?"

"Well, it feels really *personal*, like I'm intruding on something you should be discussing with him *privately* -"

"Like it's, what, top-secret, classified information? You're family, I fail to see why you wouldn't know about me asking -"

"It's not the information so much as... setting the tone for asking. Even though I'm sure he'll say yes, I also don't want him to feel pressured by another person being there to witness the question, feeling like he'll come off like a jackass if he says no. And... what you're asking him opens up questions about the future and... your respective places in each other's future. That could get even more personal, if you get my drift."

"I do, which is exactly why you need to be there, because we... can't have that conversation."

Ali glared. Sören glared back. Once more, Sören got the mental image of telling little Maedhros to eat his vegetables and Maedhros using the Force to dump them all over Fëanor.

Sören sighed. "Ali, I need moral support. Please. I'm not asking you to*do* anything, try to convince him, you can even hang back a few meters if it makes you more comfortable. It's just that... having you around would help. You help keep me sane, you help keep my anxiety levels down. You would also keep me accountable, so I don't bolt out of there without asking." Sören had an idea, thinking of his daily runs with Anthony. "You said you wanted to see the Aboriginal shark engraving, you could come with us."

"Wellllllllllllll, I did say that, yes, and I still want to see it, soooooo." Ali shrugged with a resigned little smile. "OK. But if we're doing *that*..." Ali wagged her finger again. "We're doing it *tomorrow*, so you can't keep putting it off."

"All right." Sören's chest felt leaden again at the idea of such a gamechanger so soon, without much advance preparation, but he knew it was better to just get it done and over with.

"It'll be fine," Ali said. "I wouldn't be encouraging you to do this if I didn't think so. You know how I am, I'd be asking if you were the dumbest cunt who ever lived."

Sören's laughter rang out. "Oh, Nelya." *The more things change, the more they stay the same.* Even with so much uncertainty, there was that small piece of comfort.

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Even though Sören had the promise from Ali that she would witness the invitation for moral support, Sören still felt keyed up about asking, enough that he couldn't sleep that night. He decided to do something productive with his insomnia and work on the painting he intended as a gift for Anthony, but though the beach scene was very pretty it also felt like something was missing, and Sören couldn't figure out what.

That nagging feeling of dissatisfaction with his own art intensified Sören's anxiety, further exacerbated by not sleeping. When Anthony came for their Krav practice instead of saying "good morning", Anthony raised an eyebrow and remarked, "You look like hell." Sören heard the unvoiced *delicious hell*.

Sören snorted. "Thanks."

"Rough night?"

Sören nodded, looking away. "Stuff on my mind."

His feeling like the painting had something missing and he'd probably never figure out what it was, also felt like a microcosm for Sören's life in general, and that frustrated him, made him hash over all his problems, especially the problem of why he even needed to ask someone to be godparent - and that preoccupation, combined with the anxiety and fatigue, made his reflexes a bit slower with Krav, which was not good at all. After a few rounds of Sören trying to disarm Anthony wielding a knife, Anthony stopped and said, "OK, we're going to do something different now."

Sören thought Anthony might give him something simple and confidence-restoring to do,

like practicing punches and kicks, but instead Anthony walked over to a briefcase he'd brought and Sören had barely noticed. Sören's eyes widened with alarm when Anthony produced a length of rope, and saw the briefcase was filled with different knives.

"What..."

"I know we usually work on Force-enhanced Krav on Fridays, and this is a bit unorthodox since you'll be using *just* the Force, but..." Anthony waved his hand and Sören felt his arms move behind his back, then he was shoved backwards against the pole, with Anthony maintaining a Force-lock on his limbs. Sören watched as the rope came floating over and Anthony slowly, calmly walked over and began to tie Sören's wrists to the pole. "Real life threats don't work on a schedule where you can anticipate and plan for them." Their eyes met. "You're off your game today, and I've been nice to you... whatever enemies you have would finish you off. Do you understand?" Anthony let go of his lock on Sören just a little so Sören could move his head.

Sören nodded. A frisson went through him as Anthony tightened the rope on his wrists; Sören's mind went right in the gutter, playing a fantasy of laying naked on a bed, Anthony tying Sören's wrists to the bed. Sören's limbs weren't too locked for his cock to harden.

"If this is too much," Anthony said softly, "I'll stop -"

"Let's do this." Sören licked his lips, trying to stop the dirty, delicious thoughts of Anthony tying him up and teasing him. Bound, with Anthony holding a knife to his throat as he kissed and nibbled Sören's neck...

Fuck.

"The objective is simple - use the Force to deflect the knives." Anthony took out four knives from his briefcase - he had at least two dozen in there - and then he waved his hand and the knives flew at him. "Go."

The knives were coming towards his eyes, his throat and his heart. Sören focused, and his mind pushed first at the knives aimed at his eyes. He watched as the knives fell to the floor, and then he mentally pushed at the one flying towards his throat, and the knife stopped before it, too, fell down. One more push, and the one aimed for his heart also paused and fell.

"Good," Anthony said. He waved his and the knives rose up from the ground. "Again."

The knives were all aimed at his head now, flying faster than before. Sören's mind pushed out at all of them at once, and they fell. Four more knives came flying out of Anthony's briefcase and Sören gave another big push.

Anthony made all eight of the knives rise up this time. Two aimed at Sören's eyes, two at his throat, two at his heart, two at his gut. After Sören's mind threw down the ones coming for his eyes and his throat, Anthony picked up the knives and Force-threw them again, coming close just as Sören stopped the other four. Sören pushed the first four knives away, and now all eight were flying at him again. Sören knocked the first four down again, and then just as Anthony was making them rise up from the floor, Sören pushed as hard as he could to make the remaining knives turn around and fly towards Anthony, and he pushed at the knives Anthony was about to aim at him, so they aimed at Anthony instead.

"Well done," Anthony said, and now the entirety of his knife collection was flying at Sören.

Every time Sören got a knife to fall or reverse course, Anthony used the Force to throw it again. Sören was getting frustrated with this but he knew if he told Anthony to stop, he was going to be angry with himself, and Anthony was absolutely right, that Sören's enemies weren't going to give him a break. He knew that dealing with Anthony's Force powers was a walk in the park compared to gods.

He wanted to be done for the day but he didn't want to quit. He managed to throw down all the knives and Anthony finally relented, as if he could sense how done and tired Sören was, not immediately making the knives fly again. But as Anthony began putting the knives back in his briefcase, one came flying towards Sören. Just one. Sören tried to push at it, to make it stop, make it reverse course, but it was as if Anthony had a lock on it just as he'd had a lock on Sören's limbs a short while ago.

The knife was getting closer. Sören wanted to believe Anthony wouldn't let serious harm come to him and he'd stop the knife if Sören did nothing, but Sören didn't know if he might accidentally stop a second too late... and even if he didn't, Sören was going to be angry with himself for giving up. Sören was already angry with himself, annoyed that his show of weakness had necessitated this drastic drill. Sören turned that anger directed at himself outward and pushed with it as hard as he could. The knife was still flying, inches away now. Sören grit his teeth.

Come on, you can do this.

Sören conjured the mental image of fire, his own body temperature warming. He pushed at the knife again, like the knife's edge represented everything and everyone that had ever threatened or harmed him and his family. *You will not defeat me.*

Sören watched as the knife broke, the blade slivering into pieces before the handle clattered on the ground and it, too, shattered.

Anthony's jaw dropped. He waved his hand and the bonds of the rope came loose. Sören flexed his wrists and wiggled his arms - his wrists and arms were sore - and he stepped away from the pole. He felt shaky, and when he looked at his newly-free hands he saw that he *was* shaking.

Sören almost fell as he took another step - whatever he'd done to that knife took a lot out of him. Anthony came to him and steadied him, and walked him over to the bench. Anthony's touch made Sören tingle, but Sören was too freaked out by what he'd just witnessed - what he'd just *done* - to get horny again right then.

"Holy shit," Anthony said, his voice hushed.

"I..." Sören swallowed hard and blinked, staring at the broken knife with disbelief. "I, ah. I..."

"Yeah." Anthony nodded slowly. "That was... something else." Anthony grinned. "You could do that to someone's face." Then he scowled. "Remind me to never get on your bad side."

No, you can just be on my backside. Sören patted him.

Anthony used the Force to pass over a bottle of water. "You probably need an electrolyte drink," Anthony said.

Sören wasn't shaking as badly as he had been a moment ago, but he was still shaking a

little and he felt a little dizzy. Sören nodded.

"I don't think we should run today," Anthony said. "I know what I said about real life threats, and your enemies not showing mercy, but it's not a good idea to overdo it, just the same."

Sören frowned. "I wanted to take Ali to see the shark. Can we at least go for a walk on the trail? Some fresh air might, ah, help." He also didn't want to chicken out with asking Anthony to be his child's godfather.

"OK." Anthony nodded. Then Anthony looked at the broken knife mess on the floor, and back at Sören, an eyebrow raised, lips quirked with amusement. "Maybe we should clean that up first..."

"Yeah, we can stop in the kitchen and I'll get a broom and an electrolyte drink."

They went inside and Sören had a drink and got a broom and dustpan from the utility closet. "I'll sweep up," Anthony said, using the Force to take the broom and dustpan before Sören could protest. "You sit for a minute."

Ali and Kenny came out, with the girls in a stroller. Sören waved to them. "You gonna behave for Uncle Kenny while I'm gone?" Sören asked, like the girls could understand him.

"Jajajajaja," Kate said.

Tori blew a raspberry.

Sören laughed and blew one back. He was still laughing when Anthony came back with the broken knife bits in the dustpan and dumped them in the trash can. Kenny's eyebrows shot up. "What's all that?" he asked.

"Sören was a bit extra today," Anthony said dryly.

"He and I are, uh, working on disarming a knife," Sören said, which was a half-truth - they had stated off doing that and then it took on a life of its own.

"You... you broke a knife?" Kenny asked, looking incredulous.

"Yeah." Sören rubbed his beard, feeling a bit like a mutant now - even for a Force-sensitive, that was out of the ordinary.

Sören felt awkward enough about it that he was quiet on the ride to the beach, but then Anthony started laughing as they got closer.

"What?" Sören asked.

"You. And that knife." Anthony glanced over at him. "Though... I was rather fond of that knife."

Sören remembered the briefcase. "Was that a collection, in there?"

Anthony nodded. "It started when I was newly in the service. I have a knife from everyplace I've been stationed, or on a mission. Just not from Australia, yet."

Now Sören felt a little guilty about breaking the knife. "Shit. I'm sorry -"

"Well, don't apologize. I'm the one who had you do that exercise, I knew going into it there was a risk something might get damaged. I didn't realize you'd completely break the knife, but... *I'm* not sorry. I think we unlocked a skill in you today, that might just save your life or someone else's."

And yet, Sören still felt so uncertain about the future. So unsafe. It weighed him down like lead as they walked the trail instead of running. Anthony noticed Sören's dark mood and said, "Seriously, Sören, don't fret about the knife -"

It wasn't that... or not completely. Sören felt that twinge of guilt again, knowing how it was to lose something of sentimental value... a piece of one's personal history. Sören remembered Anthony's flat, and how it was a bit on the spartan side, the hallmark of someone who had spent their entire adult life moving from place to place, necessarily traveling light. Losing something like a knife from a knife collection was a bigger deal than it might be to other people.

They stopped at the shark carving so Ali could get a good look at it, walking around it, examining it from different angles. As Ali studied the shark, Sören looked out at the sea, thinking of the painting he wanted to give Anthony - the painting that anyone else in the world would think was done but himself, because Sören couldn't shake the feeling that it was missing something and he had no idea what, and he wasn't sure he would figure that out anytime soon.

Sören did want to give Anthony something, a token of friendship... and now the thought came to him. Sören wanted to forge a sword of his own, instead of always having to borrow Maglor's, but he knew that was a big undertaking since he hadn't forged before in this lifetime, and even with Fëanor's memories it still felt like a *lot* to do as one's first smithing project. It made sense to start smaller, and a knife was enough like a sword that it would be good practice, and there was something that appealed to Sören about giving Anthony a gift that was his very first attempt at forging in this life. *If it comes out any good.* But already Sören could see it in his mind's eye, like it was meant to be created.

Sören felt excited about getting to work on the knife when the forge was finished - which would be any day now - but then his anxiety returned, hoping it would be a nice knife... hoping Anthony would think so, and not be offended at trying to replace something that was sort of irreplaceable, since the broken knife hadn't just been any random thing but had been a piece of Anthony's past.

"Penny for your thoughts," Anthony said.

Sören didn't want to give away the surprise. He quickly doubled down on his shielding and decided he would ask the question. But suddenly it started to feel very warm, like the temperature had just shot up ten degrees, and it was the Australian winter. The ground began to *thrum*. Sören opened his mouth and no sound came out, and he looked away from the sea, and Anthony, and over at Ali.

He gasped - the outline of the shark was glowing with blue light. Sören quickly looked around, hoping there were no other onlookers, and Anthony did the same. To Sören's relief, it was just them in the immediately visible area.

"What..." Anthony began to point at the shark, his hand shaking. "What in the..."

"I think it's a portal," Ali said, and met Sören's eyes.

Then Sören looked at Anthony. Sören knew Anthony - and all of MI6 - knew about the portals. But he also knew Anthony would probably know about this one if it was known to MI6, and from the look of shock on Anthony's face, it was clear he did not.

"Well," Sören said, "only one way to find out." He used the Force to pick up a small pebble from the ground, and gestured for Ali to stand back. He tossed the pebble at the shark carving and they watched as the shark carving filled with entirely blue light, the blue light rose like a shark-shaped bubble, and the pebble disappeared and the light went back to just the outline.

"I have no idea where I sent that off to," Sören said, and he wondered where in the world it had gone - or perhaps, where in the *worlds*, if it had fallen into another universe entirely.

"Sending a pebble god knows where isn't really the only way to find out," Ali said. "Now the three of us, going through it to somewhere... that would confirm what it is."

Anthony blinked. "I can't advise that -"

"Look, it's your job, and your department's job, to know about this kind of shit," Ali said, folding her arms. "This is relevant to your interests. Have any of you in MI6 actually been through one of these things, or have you just observed them?"

"Just observed," Anthony said.

Ali chuckled. "Sören and I have both been through them. The best sort of knowledge is firsthand. Come on, let's test it out."

"There are practical concerns," Anthony said. "We could create an incident if we were spotted on the other side, which is a real possibility with more trafficked gates like Stonehenge. When we port back here, we could get caught here, too, and we really don't need a scene with the locals."

"So... are there people you can call, to watch the gates? Keep people away?" Sören's curiosity was getting the better of him, and he realized it wasn't just curiosity but a nagging feeling he had, a theory... something that could potentially be a gamechanger when the call to arms came, as much as the gamechanger of his ability to shatter a steel blade.

Ali narrowed her eyes at Sören. "Where are we going?" Ali knew as well as Sören did that one had to have a specific destination in mind with the portal to not get lost.

The answer came out before Sören could stop himself. "Dimmuborgir." He knew he couldn't go home to Iceland to live, or even on a short vacation, but for a few minutes, he needed to set foot in his country one last time.

Anthony pulled out his phone and stepped aside. Sören tried not to eavesdrop, not wanting to be rude, but he heard Anthony say, "Hi, Jim? I need a favor. Two favors, actually. Can you send a drone out to watch Gate 14, and can you also send one out to the Bondi trail? A couple of the snowflakes think they found something and we're about to test it out." There was a muffled male voice on the other end, and a moment later Anthony said, "Brilliant, thank you."

Anthony put his phone away and walked back over. Ali put her hands on her hips. "Snowflakes?"

"Yes, it's a department codename for people like us," Anthony said. He rolled his eyes. "The department codename for *me specifically* is Frosty. As in the snowman."

Sören threw his head back and laughed. "Wow. Just... wow."

Ali tried not to laugh, and failed. Then she got serious again. "OK, let's do this." She reached out for Sören's hand.

Sören's other hand took Anthony's hand, and Sören's mind's eye conjured a very clear mental image of the Dimmuborgir, someplace he'd been countless times in his life. Ali marched them forward, and before Sören knew what was happening, it felt like they were falling, and the entire world was swallowed by blue light.

It had been long enough since Sören had used the portals - not since December 2020 - that he'd almost forgotten what a rough ride it was, worse than anything in an amusement park, just falling, falling, falling, and then the crash.

Sydney was eleven hours ahead of Reykjavik - it was a little after eleven AM in Sydney, and a little after eleven PM at the Dimmuborgir. Because Iceland had close to twenty hours of daylight during the summer, they had arrived just in time to watch the sun set. The sky was a dramatic blaze of orange, gold, and pink, the air a hazy gold that made Anthony and Ali even more beautiful. Sören's breath caught at the sight of the black lava formations of the Dimmuborgir and the green, wildflower-studded grass, in the glowing sunset. Getting to see this again, in-person, made up for the terrible ride of the portal.

"Holy fucking shit," Anthony said, his voice hushed, looking around in awe. "This is magnificent."

Ali's eyes misted a little. "I always wanted to go to Iceland. Da told me so much about it. Even though Australia has been his home for a long time now, he still gets homesick."

"I can imagine." Sören put a hand on her arm, his own eyes tearing up. "*Fuck.*" He was almost regretting coming here, even as he also wouldn't take it back. It was going to rip at that wound of leaving Iceland behind, all over again.

"Jesus." Anthony wiped his eyes, and Sören's jaw trembled as his tears spilled, undone by the sight of Anthony getting emotional. "It's... everything," Anthony said, meeting Sören's eyes. "It's one thing to know the gates exist, another thing to *use* one and feel that kind of power for yourself. Another thing entirely to come out of one to *this*." Anthony gestured to the land around them.

"I wish I could take you on a tour," Sören said. He remembered when he'd taken Dooku on a tour - when they'd gotten so caught up by the beauty of the northern lights that they'd made love for the first time. He knew the temptation with Anthony would be impossible to resist if he showed Anthony all the little wonders of his world.

"Someday," Anthony said, nodding. "We'd have to talk about it and some protocol, to make sure you weren't recognized. In the meantime..." Anthony gave a shuddery little sigh, looking up at the glorious sunset, and then around at the Dimmuborgir again.

Even though Sören knew they shouldn't stay long, in case of tourists - though he did see a drone flying in the distance, and he shuddered when he realized that drone was probably set to attack accidental, innocent bystanders - he took Ali's and Anthony's hands again and led them around on a little walk. "I painted Nico here once," Sören said, remembering that painting - remembering the picnic he and Dooku had here, in the snow, an equally

dramatic but very different sunset, in winter.

"I saw that painting," Anthony said.

"You remember it."

Anthony nodded.

Sören felt like screaming in frustration that he wasn't going to finish his painting for Anthony anytime soon. But then his focus returned to the haunting, melancholy arches, like ruins of an ancient palace or temple. People had believed the gods once dwelled here - Ingwion had said this portal could be used to directly get to Asgard, and Ingwion himself had been spotted by Sören's mother when she was a small child.

"OK, we should head back," Sören said, a shiver going through him at the thought of Ingwion, the thought of Asgard; he wondered if they, too, were monitoring that portal the way the drone was.

They stepped back into the arch and there was ultraviolet light and the feeling of being flung upward, then down again. The light went from ultraviolet to blue and they were back on the Bondi trail, standing on top of the shark carving, which stopped glowing after they walked off of it.

Sören looked behind them and saw another drone flying around. Anthony made a series of hand signals and the drone gave a few beeps and flew off. Anthony took a deep breath and looked at the shark carving in disbelief, then at Sören and Ali. "I can't believe we just did that."

"We did," Sören said, patting him.

"You *breaking a knife* and us finding a portal MI6 didn't know about... I don't think this day could possibly get any weirder," Anthony said.

Sören gave a nervous laugh. His eyes met Ali's and he could hear her yell *BLOODY ASK HIM* into his mind.

As they got in the car to take Sören and Ali back home, Sören finally said, "So, I think I have one more thing that might make your day extra weird."

Anthony's eyes narrowed before he ducked into the driver's seat. Once they were on the road Anthony looked at Sören and said, "Well, out with it."

"Frankie is giving me full custody," Sören said.

"That's not weird, though I assume you know this means you'll need a lawyer -"

"Yeah, I know all that and I know you'll handle it. Anyway, full custody means full decisions over stuff like the name, and..." Sören swallowed hard, his heart beating faster as he steeled himself. "OK... I... have my brother Dag's kids, right, because he made me godfather in case something happened to him. I want a godparent for the same reason, in case something happens to me and Nico and Mag - Marcus..." Sören caught himself just in time. "Someone I know and trust to take them in and look after them, as opposed to leaving it up to random foster care. I have powerful enemies, and I know you're helping me to find my own power, but..."

"It's always good to have a contingency plan," Anthony said, nodding. "So... do you also need me to get some sort of adoption paperwork together for Ali in the event of..."

Sören facepalmed, fighting the urge to bolt out of the car screaming.

"I told him no," Ali said before Sören could say anything. "I haven't made an announcement of this yet, but I told Sören yesterday I think I'm pregnant. Three kids is enough of a responsibility, so I'm only willing to take on number four if he can't get anyone else."

"And there is someone I have in mind," Sören said.*Oh shit here we go...*"You."

Anthony pulled over. He started to laugh hysterically and then he calmed down and gave Sören a deadly serious look. "Me."

Sören nodded. "You can say no, but -"

"I didn't say no," Anthony said. "I just... never thought I'd... be a parent. And hopefully, I will never, ever be in that position of having to take..." He couldn't finish the sentence, and Sören didn't fault him for that, though now Sören's stomach was doing flip-flops, realizing the thought of losing Sören was as difficult for Anthony as the thought of losing Anthony was for Sören.

*We are definitely in way too deep, and we haven't even fucked.*Followed by a *Yet.* Sören facepalmed again, fighting the urge to bite his own hand. *OK, could we not with thinking like that right now?* He couldn't believe himself sometimes.

"I'm not planning on letting those fuckers kill me," Sören said. "But my brother also wasn't planning on being abducted on our birthday last year, either."

"I'll do it," Anthony said. "I don't think I'm parent material, but I suppose giving a shit is half the battle."

"Cleaning up shit is the other half," Ali quipped, and then she clapped her hand over her mouth and mumbled, "Sorry."

But Anthony laughed again, and so did Sören, feeling relieved - not just that Anthony had said yes, but Sören wasn't picking up any emotions or broadcasts that Anthony thought this was getting to be too much, too intense, too fast.

"And I mean," Sören went on, "you already get some exposure to kids now, with Kate and Tori, and... if you keep hanging around, you'll be a part of my child's life anyway."

"A corrupting influence, probably," Anthony quipped.

"I already manage that on my own," Sören said. "I'm surprise the girls haven't said 'fuck' yet."

Anthony laughed again. Then he sighed, and pulled back onto the road. "I suppose I should thank you for asking me. That... takes a lot of trust."

Sören wanted to reply with *I do trust you* but held back, because he knew the word that came out wouldn't be *trust*. Now his heart was pounding again, face on fire. "Thank you for accepting," was all he said.

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Some time after Anthony had gone back home, Sören went into Maglor's studio, where he knew Maglor kept the map of portals that Ingwion had given him back in 2019... what felt like ages ago, now. He knew Maglor wouldn't mind him borrowing the map, especially with what had happened today - Sören was going to have to tell Maglor and Dooku about it later.

Sören rolled out the map on the coffee table and he, Ali, and Kenny looked it over. There were other portals in Australia, but the shark portal in Sydney hadn't been marked.

"I wonder if he knew about it," Sören said. "Since he was seen leaving by the Uluru portal and not this one, even though this was closer."

"I'm guessing he probably doesn't know about it," Ali said. She stroked her chin. "I bet there are probably other portals he doesn't know about. My mum said that when I was a child, there were wards put on me to shield me from Odin or other evil spirits being able to find me. So that might be the same with that portal as well, it was maybe meant not to be found by just anyone."

"That's interesting." Sören leaned back. "That's very interesting."

"Yeah," Kenny said. "It could be strategically useful. The Aesir are probably watching the other portals, but they'll have a lot less advance warning if you come to the Dimmuborgir from a portal they don't know about, than one they do."

Sören nodded. "That was my thought. If they're watching the Dimmuborgir they know I was there, but they don't know how I got there, and... good luck with trying to figure it out if they don't know already. Especially if there's a ward on that shark portal."

Sören felt just a little more optimistic, between shattering the knife, and the existence of this portal that it didn't seem Ingwion or his friends knew about. But he knew that it wasn't a good idea to get his hopes up too much - that almost always precipitated a massive letdown. And he knew that if they had been seen at the Dimmuborgir, arriving from someplace that was unknown, Odin might well see that as a threat, and bring it before Sören was ready. Sören would never quite feel ready, but he was especially not feeling ready right now.

Even so, it was something. Ali reached over and gave him a hug.

Chapter 27

It was Tuesday, July twentieth, and on Tuesdays, Anthony took Sören to the range, accompanied by Ali, Kenny, Metallica and Megadeth. Taking Ali and Kenny along meant that Sören had to bring Kate and Tori, unless they went for a much later time where Dooku or Marcus would be home to watch them. That also meant that Sören rode to the range with Anthony, since the Land Rover had seats for seven, and while technically Kate and Tori's car seats could fit in one seat, Sören still felt more comfortable with their car seats in separate seats in the Audi. Anthony knew that very soon, Sören would be bringing his child with Frankie, as well - Frankie was due any day now. Anthony didn't mind having the kids come along, since the range was designed to prevent accidents, but he knew when he and Sören walked into the range with Kate and Tori, that the people who worked there assumed they were a gay couple and those were their daughters. Anthony found that he didn't hate that assumption, and he was relieved that most people were accepting enough these days that nobody gave them a hard time at the range - he was annoyed not with people assuming it, but that he desperately *wanted* it to be true and of course, it wasn't. It couldn't be. He was deeply touched that Sören wanted him to be the godfather of his child, but it was also a bitter reminder that was all he would ever be. He hoped that if the vision he'd seen of himself and Sören raising a daughter together was true of some parallel universe and not just a daydream, that version of him knew how good he had it and was grateful.

Anthony sighed as his Audi pulled into the carport. Even though he'd seen Sören yesterday, under twenty-four hours ago, it still felt too long, and he knew he was arriving a bit early, but he really wanted to see Sören and get some extra time with him. His face burned as he parked the car and turned off the engine; he knew he was acting like a lovesick teenager, and he hoped he wouldn't come off as too needy and annoy Sören. He had never been like this about someone, and he felt like an idiot for the giddy rush that put a spring in his step as he got out of the car, twirling the keys around and around on his finger as he made his way to the front door. *You're just going to the shooting range. It's not a date. It's not even a relationship.*

His stomach was doing flip-flops at the prospect of seeing Sören again any second now. Those sweet brown eyes. That smile that lit up the whole world.

Ali opened the door before Anthony could knock or ring the doorbell. "Hey," she said.

"Hi," Anthony said.

Ali stepped back and Anthony walked in, looking around. Metallica and Megadeth were playing a video game with Kenny, and Kate and Tori were sitting in the stroller ready to go, sucking on pacifiers. Before Anthony could ask where he was, Ali said, "Sören's in the forge."

Anthony wasn't entirely surprised Sören was in the forge - he knew Sören had been very excited about its completion, and Anthony *was* a bit early - but now he felt another twinge of anxiety, like he would be interrupting something by going to the forge. Nonetheless, he headed out there, taking a deep breath and rubbing his hands together as he got closer.

The forge was unlocked, and Anthony could hear the sound of hammering, not knowing if Sören would hear him knock above the hammer, so he just walked in.

Sören was at the anvil, hammering a piece of red-hot-glowing steel fresh from the fire. He was shirtless and sweaty, jeans slung low on his hips, revealing the dark treasure trail. His dark mop of curls was damp and tumbled loose to his shoulders. Hammering the steel on the anvil worked the muscles in his arms and chest, and Anthony was transfixed - now he got a good look at the way Sören had been gaining muscle definition between the pole workouts, Krav, and as of late, the forge. The veins were starting to show in Sören's forearms.

Anthony's cock jumped in his jeans; somehow, the sight of Sören hammering steel was as sensual and erotic as Sören dancing on the pole, if not moreso.

Sören looked up from his work but did not stop, his brown eyes intense, his expression almost angry in its determination. "Jæja?"

A shiver went down Anthony's spine, despite the heat of the forge, and Anthony's cock throbbed again, wanting. He also had the strangest sense of déjà vu, like this wasn't the first time Anthony had interrupted Sören working in the forge, even though this was in fact the first time Anthony had ever seen Sören working in the forge.

Anthony licked his lips, his mouth suddenly dry, finding himself barely able to make words, completely mesmerized by the magnificence of a sweaty, shirtless Sören hammering steel on an anvil. "I'm sorry, I know I'm a little early," Anthony said.

"How early is a little?"

Anthony realized Sören had probably lost all track of time with whatever he was working on. "About twenty minutes or so."

Sören exhaled. He stopped for a moment to wipe his brow, and then he said, "I don't want to be rude, but do you mind waiting? You can wait here or in the house, I don't care, but I'd like to get this hammered out while it's still hot."

It's definitely still hot. "It's fine." Anthony saw there was a bench, and he sat.

He immediately regretted doing so - it was very warm in the forge, and Anthony was getting hornier by the second watching Sören hammering the piece of steel. Sören was also too wrapped up in his work to notice Anthony sitting there with an obvious hard-on, which Anthony found amazing - that was some serious dedication. Anthony tried to distract himself nonetheless, this was the worst possible time to be aroused when they were leaving soon for the range, but the longer Anthony watched Sören at the anvil, the more his cock stiffened and his balls ached. Sören's nipple rings were bouncing with each stroke of the hammer, sweat dripping down his chest.

It got to be too much. "I need to visit the bathroom," Anthony said.

Sören looked up again. "OK, I should probably, ah, freshen up a little before we go."

Under any other circumstance Anthony would have waited and walked into the house together with Sören, but he knew if he did that he was going to be too tempted to follow Sören into the shower and they would never get to the range. Anthony got up as quickly as he could, like it was an emergency, and ran for the house - running with a hard-on was not fun - and as soon as he was in the downstairs bathroom, he unzipped his jeans, took down his boxer-briefs, and his cock was in his left hand and he stroked himself fast and furious, his mind replaying Sören at the anvil... evolving into fantasies of licking the sweat

from Sören's body, licking Sören's pierced nipples into hard peaks as Sören moaned, licking and sucking Sören's cock to tease him, until Sören was begging for it, then bending Sören over the anvil and pounding Sören's ass the way Sören had pounded at the steel. Anthony's free hand clapped over his mouth as he cried out with his climax, muffling the cry as his knees buckled and he had to lean against the sink counter not to fall over. When he looked down he saw he'd gotten cum not just on the sink but also on his black T-shirt, and he frantically dabbed at it with a wet washcloth, hoping nobody would notice any lingering stains on his shirt. He knew it was probably obvious he had the hots for Sören, but he didn't want to make it *that* obvious.

On the ride to the shooting range, they were quiet. Sören stared out the window, the breeze in his hair, and Anthony could feel that Sören's mind was far away, still back at the forge, wrapped up in whatever it was he was creating - Sören was a bit shielded on that matter. Anthony's face was on fire, thinking of how urgently he'd needed to masturbate, like a hormonal teenager again, not able to help himself. He was surprised he had that visceral of a reaction to Sören in the forge, and he tried to make himself think of other things, not wanting to get worked up all over again.

Shooting practice provided a much-needed distraction, as his focus went to helping Sören, Ali, and Kenny at the range, while a youth instructor worked with Metallica and Megadeth. After the range Sören sent the girls home with Ali and Kenny so he and Anthony could go on their run down the trail, and that too was another distraction, as Anthony watched the scenery and once again marveled at the shark carving being a portal - not that he planned on using it again anytime soon.

After their run, Anthony felt reluctant to part with Sören for the day; missing him was why he'd arrived early. "Do you want to... go get ice cream or something? Or have a drink at my place?"

Sören gave an apologetic little frown. "I need to get back to the forge."

Even though Sören had washed up before the range, Anthony could still smell a lingering note of woodsmoke and it was making him horny again. It was probably just as well that Sören wanted to go back rather than spending more time, though Anthony felt disappointed anyway. "Oh. OK." He tried to keep the disappointment out of his voice, not wanting Sören to feel guilty. Then Anthony's curiosity got the better of him. "What are you working on?"

Sören pursed his lips and raised an eyebrow. "I know it's your job to know what's going on with us, but surely I can have at least a few secrets?"

Anthony felt a little embarrassed for asking... but not as embarrassed as what came later, when he was alone in his flat, not able to sleep, thinking about Sören again, and indulged a secret of his own, taking out one of his toys - a Fleshlight that simulated an anus - and went to town, fucking the Fleshlight, fantasizing about fucking Sören in the forge. He had been masturbating to Sören pretty regularly the last few months but now it was getting ridiculous, with him bringing himself off multiple times a day. He cried out Sören's name as he climaxed, and as he lay there panting, trying to catch his breath, his cheeks burned once more. He had never felt any sort of stigma about masturbation, nonetheless, he felt annoyed with himself that it was *all* he was doing. He wasn't trying to initiate a relationship or at least friends-with-benefits with Sören, feeling like it would cross a line with his assignment - as if accepting the godfather role for Sören's child wasn't already crossing a line - and he wasn't going to a bar or a club to cruise and pound some trick's ass, because he felt like it would be a poor substitute for what he really wanted.

Anthony sighed as he cleaned out the Fleshlight and put it away. Craig hopped up on the bed with a soft "Prrp?" and came over to headbutt Anthony as if to say *At least I love you.* But of course a cat's companionship wasn't remotely the same thing.

Nonetheless, sated post-orgasm, Anthony was comforted as he lay back down and Craig snuggled onto his back, purring away. Anthony thought about what it would be like to hold Sören, cats purring around them in a cozy blanket fort, and smiled a little as he drifted off to sleep.

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Anthony is in a body not his own - taller, a flood of blond hair. He has dreamed about this many times before, over the years.

This time there's something different - he is approaching a forge and there is Sören, with long black hair, clean-shaven, grey eyes instead of brown, no ink on his arms. Hammering on the anvil, that look of intense focus on his face, almost angry.

It has been awhile since they've seen each other, but Sören does not pause from his work, only looks up and raises an eyebrow as he continues hammering. Now Anthony goes to him - not running, but his pace isn't slow, either - and he wrests the hammer from Sören's hands, pulls Sören into his arms, and kisses him hungrily. Sören moans into the kiss and wastes no time undoing Anthony's robes, tunic, and breeches. Soon they are both naked, hard cocks pressed together as they kiss again and again, hands roaming over each other's bodies, needing to touch, feel. It seems almost as if Sören's wandering hands are sculpting him to life; Anthony moans at the warm radiance of Sören's touch, making him feel alive again. Anthony starts kissing Sören's neck, breathing in the scent of smoke and spice, going out of his mind with lust, with need. It has been too long.

"All work and no play," Anthony teases as he reaches down to grasp their cocks in his fist, stroking them together slowly.

Sören's hand covers his and Sören's other hand grabs a fistful of his hair. "Oh, I think you'll be working quite hard, in just a minute here."

"Is that so." Anthony lets go of their cocks and shoves Sören down on the anvil. He uses the Force to reach for a bottle of oil he knows Sören keeps nearby for moments just like this, and readies them both. Then he hooks one of Sören's legs onto his shoulder, almost undone by the way Sören gasps out "*yes*" as Anthony guides the tip of his cock to Sören's passage.

"Take it," Sören pants. "Fuck me..."

Anthony pushes inside and nothing has ever felt so sweet, so right. It feels like Sören is welcoming him home.

"I've missed you so much," Anthony says as he bottoms out in him, Sören wrapped around him, the center of his universe. "I love you so much. Need you so much..."

Sören reaches up, smiling adoringly. "Give us what we both need, Ara."

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Usually Anthony would welcome a dream about Sören - a pleasant dream, a dream that wasn't reliving the war in the Middle East - but he just felt downright unsettled as he started his day. The sex dream intensified his concern that he was in way over his head and maybe someone else needed to handle this assignment in Sydney, because getting attached like this could too easily be compromised somehow.

And the way his desire for Sören had crossed wires with the recurring dreams he'd had of "elsewhere", since he was young... that bothered him. Especially now. It was one thing to know parallel universes were real, and that there were beings with godlike powers, that humans had worshiped as gods, walking among us. But it was another thing to speculate on what that implied - what about mythology was true or not... what about various beliefs was true or not. Like the belief in ancient advanced civilizations... the belief in past lives. "Elsewhere" could be another reality... or it could be a civilization that had existed before this one.

A time before, when he'd lived a life as someone named "Ara".

Anthony shivered. *Stop that.* He didn't like that train of thought at all.

Anthony felt like he was made of lead as he drove over to Sören's place for their Wednesday Krav practice. He wanted to see Sören again, he missed him, but that ache was growing stronger all the time. And that dream...

To his surprise and relief, Sören wasn't in the forge when he arrived, but opened the door. "Hi," Sören said, giving him a shy little smile. "You want anything, or should we get right down to business?"

I want something, all right. Anthony took a deep breath. "Let's practice, and we can kick back afterwards, if, you know, you're not busy."

Sören's shy little smile was now a cryptic little smile, his dark eyes gleaming with mischief, and Anthony wondered what he was up to as he followed Sören out to the practice room. He didn't have room to wonder for long, as Sören immediately got into the fighting stance.

They spent the next hour attacking each other, Sören defending himself against bear hugs and hair grabs and chokes, then more work with disarming a knife, disarming a gun. Sören was getting good, enough that Anthony was starting to consider Sören less his student and more a sparring partner... but Anthony could sense part of Sören was not entirely there, as if his mind were back in the forge again, or on something else entirely. Again there was that shielding, like Sören was trying to hide something, and it bothered him a little, even as he knew that Sören was in fact entitled to a few secrets - if their situation were reversed, Anthony would want some privacy too, would be annoyed by how much MI6 knew, and wanted to know.

Finally when their Krav session was done, before they left for their run they sat on the bench and took a water break. Their eyes met and after he took a big gulp of water, Sören wiped his mouth and said, "I have something for you."

Anthony was sort of hoping it was a blowjob, but he knew Sören was as reluctant to cross that line as he was, for different reasons. Sören made a "wait here" gesture and Anthony sat on the bench as Sören went into the house. Anthony's heart beat just a little faster, wondering what it was... wondering if it had anything to do with what Sören had been working on in the forge.

He realized then that was why Sören had been keeping his forging project a secret. Sören had broken one of Anthony's knives with the Force... he was probably replacing it.

It was still a surprise, even though Anthony had figured it out when Sören marched back in, hands behind his back. Sören handed over a leather sheath and Anthony gasped as he pulled out a Viking-style seax knife.

"You made this," Anthony said, his voice hushed, reverent. He ran his finger along the handle, and then the blade.

Sören nodded. "It's my first knife. I'm... going to make a sword so I can have my own sword to spar with Nico and, ah, Marcus, instead of using Marcus's sword, and it made sense to try first with a knife."

"It's beautiful work." Anthony's compliment was sincere.

"You don't think it's too simple, too plain?"

Anthony shook his head vehemently. "It's elegant in its simplicity. And it feels almost like I'm holding an ancient relic." Anthony chuckled. "A seax made by a real live Viking." He almost said *my very own Viking* and stopped himself just in time.

Sören beamed - that radiant smile that took Anthony's breath away - and Sören came closer, putting a hand on Anthony's shoulder, making Anthony tingle, his cock stirring as Sören's other hand pointed at his work. "The handle is maple and the bolster is moose antler. I made that, too, not just the blade."

"I like it," Anthony said. "This is much nicer than the knife you broke. Almost too nice. I feel like I should be paying you for it."

Sören chuckled. "It's a gift. I mean, it is to replace the knife I broke but even if I hadn't broken one of your knives, if I knew you collected them, I would have wanted to make you something. I'm glad you like it."

"I do." Anthony ran his finger over the blade again. For a moment he could almost hear the blade sing, and it felt like the metal was still hot, fresh from the forge, even though he knew that wasn't the case.

"I have a small favor to ask," Sören said.

"Hm?" Anthony gave the knife one last admiring look before he put it back in the sheath, for safekeeping.

"On Friday, when we do our usual Force-enhanced Krav... bring the knife I made you. I want to test something." Sören looked deadly serious again.

"O-ok," Anthony said, wondering what Sören could possibly mean by that - if he should be concerned or not. But he had to look at the knife again, taking it out of its sheath, marveling over its simple beauty... the feeling of *power* that radiated from it, as if it were magic somehow. "God, that's amazing work. And that's your first time forging something?"

Sören nodded solemnly.

"I can barely believe it." Anthony let out a low whistle, impressed. "I would have thought

this was made by a master craftsman."

Sören grinned again, and then he used the Force to set the knife down and gave Anthony a big hug. As much as Sören's touch made Anthony crazy with lust, he returned the hug, savoring the feel of holding Sören, even for just a minute. "I'm so glad you like it," Sören said, squeezing him.

"I love it." *I love you.*

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Later, back at his flat, Anthony took the knife out again. It wasn't just nice to look at, but it was almost as if he had a piece of Sören there with him.

Of all the things Sören could have forged as a "stepping stone" to a sword, it was a knife *for him*. Not something for one of his partners, not something for his cousin or his cousin's kids... but a gift for him. Anthony knew, of course, that part of the motivation was to replace the broken knife, but it still felt deeper.

It really did look like something straight out of the Viking Age. Anthony's mind ran away with him, envisioning Sören as a Viking, a fierce berserker... shirtless and sweaty. That led back to thinking of Sören in the forge, hammering the steel.

Anthony put down the knife and found himself taking out his cock, stroking it. He was ragingly hard now, fighting the urge to drive back to Sören's place, throw Sören over his shoulder like a caveman, drag him off and make him scream.

Anthony went to his bedroom, quickly got his clothes off, and slipped into bed. He opened the bedtable and out came the Fleshlight again. Then, on impulse, he got out his other toy - a prostate massager. While Anthony was more of a top, he was versatile, taking it as well as giving it - he felt that his experience bottoming helped him to be a better top, knowing how to please his partner. Now he just felt greedy, pushing the massager inside him as the Fleshlight gripped his cock. He turned on the massager and it purred away at that sweet spot as he began to thrust.

Once again, he fantasized about taking Sören in the forge. His dream last night - Sören's leg on his shoulder, Sören laying on his back on the anvil - burned through his mind. Now it took a twist. With the massager pulsing at his prostate, Anthony thought about what it would be liked to be filled as he filled Sören. The fantasy evolved into Dooku behind him, Dooku's chest against Anthony's back, Dooku's arms around him as he thrust into Anthony, as Anthony thrust into Sören. *"Fuck him like I'm fucking you,"* in that deep, velvet voice between kisses at his neck, the silver beard tickling and teasing.

"Oh god." Anthony gave a tormented little cry, thrusting into the Fleshlight faster, turning up the massager, completely lost in the deliciousness of those mental images. It got even hotter when Anthony thought about Marcus joining them, Marcus offering his cock for Sören and Anthony to lick at, take turns sucking, kissing each other with Marcus's precum on their tongues. "Oh god. Oh god, shit, *fuck...*" Anthony gasped and shuddered, so close, rushing to that point of no return. The thought of Marcus coming in his mouth as he made Sören come, Sören's seed shooting over him, set Anthony off, screaming as his orgasm jolted him.

The throbbing pleasure was so intense it almost hurt. The room spun, Anthony's heart

pounding in his ears as he floated on a sea of light, all the tension melting out of him, nothing existing but bliss.

When he came back to himself, his cheeks burned. He'd definitely crossed a line way back with how much he masturbated about Sören... he felt like he had sailed halfway around the world from wherever that line was, bringing Dooku and Marcus into it too, wanting all three of them.

If I was sane, I'd call MI6 right now and tell them to find someone else to babysit the snowflakes in Sydney.

But he felt like walking away from Sören was an impossible feat, something for a stronger man than himself. Was it the right thing to do? Yes. Was it something he could bring himself to do? No.

It's fitting you gave me a knife, you've ripped out my heart.

He couldn't angst for too long. The orgasm had shattered him enough that he was getting sleepy now. Anthony closed his eyes and sighed, letting himself fade.

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Anthony is in the other body again, with long blond hair. He is laying on a fur rug in front of a fireplace, naked, with Sören next to him, also naked. On the other side of Sören is Dooku - young, clean-shaven, startlingly blue eyes, black hair as long as Sören's. He, too, is naked.

They are basking in the afterglow of orgasm, drinking wine, feeding each other pieces of fruit from each other's fingers, playful and sensual. At last they cuddle up together, a tangle of arms and legs, holding each other, safe and warm. Sören giggles a little - laughing through tears of joy.

"I love you both so much," Sören says. "Sometimes I just want to retreat into the shadows and never come out again but you... you give me light."

Time passes - Anthony goes back to his realm, missing Sören, missing Dooku - and then he rides out again to visit. This time, Sören has something wonderful to show them.

Sören loves to make jewelry for other people - he is particularly fond of making adornments for Dooku and Anthony - but he wears almost none of it himself, preferring to be as unencumbered as possible, spending as much time in the forge as he does. Now, however, he has a crown, and on that crown are three white stones, glowing with every color of the rainbow. Glowing like small suns, brighter than anything Anthony has ever seen.

Sören lets them touch the stones. They are warm, like the warmth of a fire, but pleasant, not too hot. Anthony gets the sense the stones could burn the wrong person, but he doesn't know how he knows that.

"My great work," Sören says, letting the crown float upward with the Force, shining its light on them, making rainbows on the wall and ceiling. Anthony is transfixed, watching the play of color, still not able to wrap his head around how Sören made something that *bright*. "One stone for each of us." He looks at Dooku and Anthony in turn, takes their

hands, kisses them, places their hands on his heart. "This is how I feel about you. How much I love you. The way your love gives me strength, gives me life. The way we love each other. When the three of us are together, our fire drives away all darkness."

The stones would have been beautiful on their own, but knowing what went into them makes them even more magnificent. Sören, Anthony and Dooku hug each other, and Anthony is crying a little bit - and then not a little bit, just breaking down, sobbing, overcome by feelings too strong for words.

A feeling deeper than love.

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Anthony was even more unsettled than he had been on Wednesday morning, when he arrived at Sören's place on Friday. He brought the knife, as requested - as much as he loved that knife it now also felt almost radioactive, like it was some sort of evidence of how he felt about Sören, being in too deep, well beyond the danger zone. The knife wasn't a stone, and Anthony had no idea how his mind conjured up a dream of those jewels. But the knife had a similar feel to it, like something had gone *into* it and he didn't know quite what.

Anthony tried to shake the disconcertment to give the Krav practice his all. For most of it, they worked on Force-throwing and Force-choking each other. But finally, in the last twenty minutes of it, Sören said, "OK, I want you to tie me up now."

Anthony almost spat his water. He knew what Sören meant, of course - tie him to the pole the way he had the day Sören broke the knife. Just the same, Anthony's mind went in the gutter, thinking of tying Sören's wrists to bedposts or a headboard and teasing him, making him beg to be fucked.

Anthony got out the rope from his briefcase, and, without being asked, the knife Sören made; Sören nodded at the sight of it. Once Sören was tied, he said to Anthony, "I want you to throw it at me, and... if you're willing to sacrifice two knives, I'll replace them. I want to test something."

Anthony was a bit reluctant to part with two more knives, souvenirs of his travels around the world, but then, not all of his memories had been pleasant ones. He took two knives from Afghanistan. "Ready?" he asked.

Sören nodded.

Anthony used the Force to fling the two Afghan knives, and the knife Sören made. He could feel it when Sören pushed back, making the knives fall to the floor. Anthony suspected Sören wasn't going to break them right away, but was working his way there. The thought of Sören breaking the knife he'd made as a gift made Anthony somewhat annoyed, but he wasn't going to tell Sören no, wanting to see what Sören meant by "test something". Anthony Force-threw the knives again and watched as Sören used the Force to throw them down. And again.

Now Anthony threw more knives, and as Sören used the Force to redirect them, Anthony threw the two Afghan knives and Sören's gift. Anthony pushed back at the knives coming towards him, sending them back at Sören. He used the Force to accelerate the knives he'd just sent back, so Sören would have to take care of them first, and when Sören had

thrown down those knives, the two Afghan knives and Sören's gift were coming dangerously close. Anthony felt the surge of power from Sören, the temperature in the room shooting up, and watched as the two Afghan knives shattered. Sören scrunched his face and grit his teeth and Anthony could feel Sören trying to push at the knife he'd made, and it wouldn't shatter. Just before it could impale Sören in the forehead, Sören gave another push and the knife just fell down... but remained intact.

Anthony used the Force to take back the knife Sören made for him. "Was that your test?"

Sören nodded. He was shaking. Anthony untied him and led him over to the bench, thrusting water at him.

After Sören drank, he said, "When I was forging your knife I wanted to, ah... see if I could make it indestructible. I know that sounds crazy, but..."

"It does, but then, the shark carving being a portal sounds crazy and that's real." Anthony gave a nervous little laugh.

Sören rubbed his beard with a wry smile. "So I... you know, ah. Enchanted it, I guess you could say. Pushed my will into it."

"And it works as intended?"

"I think so." Sören picked up the knife and twirled it around, then he handed it to Anthony. "I'd like to make really sure, though."

Anthony exhaled. "If it's all the same to you, I really don't want to lose any more knives. I do think your talent at breaking things should be explored, developed further, but we can maybe get other things to practice with -"

"I wasn't thinking about you throwing knives again." Their eyes met, and held. "Those exercises we do, where you pull a knife on me and I have to disarm you... we can try that. I can try to shatter the knife at closer proximity, where adrenaline is running a bit higher. Like I said, if I break it, I'll replace it, but I'm trying to make sure I *can't* break it."

Anthony was still reluctant, but he conceded. After they finished their water they got into position. Anthony wasn't going to make it easy for Sören - when Sören grabbed to take the knife away from him, Anthony pushed Sören onto the floor. Then they were rolling around, one on top of the other, pinning each other, Sören trying to take the knife away and Anthony moving it each time, threatening a new part of Sören with each move, not letting go even as Sören tried to choke him and used a hand to punch him, tried to kick.

They were also grinding against each other as they wrestled, and the thought of them biting and scratching each other, fucking roughly, rutting like two animals, drove Anthony out of his mind.

At last Anthony was on top of Sören, his knife at Sören's throat, and when Sören reached again for the knife, Anthony let go and aimed it at Sören with the Force while his hands grabbed both of Sören's wrists. He could feel Sören pushing with the Force, trying to shatter the knife, but it wasn't budging. Sören gave up, breathing hard, and Anthony let the knife fall to the floor beside them...

...and his hands were still locked on Sören's wrists. Anthony could feel Sören rock-hard in his gym shorts... up against Anthony's own hardness. Their faces were close, Sören's lips parted, pupils blown wide, the two of them both panting now, as much with desire as with

exertion. Anthony felt himself leaning in closer, drawn to those lips, and Sören's own face was moving forward, closer, closer, about to kiss...

Sören's cell phone went off.

Jesus Christ. Anthony felt ready to scream.

Sören used the Force to pull the phone out of his pocket. His eyes widened when he saw the number and Anthony let go so Sören could swipe to accept. "Jæja?"

Anthony felt a prickle of annoyance - he'd warned Sören about using Icelandic on the phone - and that annoyance sharpened when he heard a staccato of what sounded like Icelandic in a contralto voice on the other end. That was Margrét from the sound of it; he was going to need to have a word with both of them, though he had a feeling if Margrét was slipping, it was something major.

Sören's eyes widened, and Anthony's annoyance became alarm. Sören replied in English, as if he'd picked up on Anthony broadcasting to watch it with the Icelandic. "OK. I'm on my way."

When Sören ended the call, he sat up and he and Anthony just looked at each other for a minute, then Sören said, "That was my sister."

"I'd got that."

"Frankie's water broke. I... need to go to the hospital. Rain check on our run?"

Anthony nodded, relieved it was just that. "You want me to come with you, for moral support...?"

"Please," Sören said.

Anthony helped him up. Taking Sören's hands sent fire through Anthony all over again, and when Sören was standing beside him they had another one of those long, meaningful looks, and Anthony desperately wanted to finish what they had started, to give him that kiss, they had been so close to kissing, finally giving in...

Just do it, you coward, Anthony told himself.

But he didn't. He simply patted Sören on the shoulder as they walked out together. Now felt like the wrong time for that, when already there was such a big change immediately on the way.

Anthony swore under his breath.

Chapter 28

Sören realized when he arrived at the hospital that he was still in his gym shorts - still sweaty from Krav. Sören knew he probably should have changed and washed up first, since he knew he was going to be awhile, but it was a bit late for that now.

Sören went to the desk and informed the receptionist who he was. He still felt odd about using the Stefan Kierkegaard alias, and just as weird about calling Frankie "Mary Frances", even though Mary Frances was actually her name - in Frankie's case, all that had changed was her surname, and her new persona was from Ireland, which was where Frankie's mother was actually from.

When Sören sat down in the lobby he remembered the shattered knives on the floor in the meditation-and-exercise room, and fired off texts to Dooku and Maglor letting them know where he was, and apologizing for the mess, even though he knew they'd understand.

Sören and Anthony sat together in the lobby and waited. Anthony pretended to be interested in a National Geographic magazine but every now and again he stole glances at Sören - who was feeling too restless and fidgety to try to look at magazines, or play on his phone, or anything else - and after a few times Sören finally raised his eyebrows.

"Sorry," Anthony said. "Are you all right?"

"No," Sören said honestly.

Anthony patted him.

Anthony's touch made Sören's heart beat faster, his stomach fluttering, heat in his cheeks. He thought about the way they'd almost kissed - that they *would* have kissed if Sören's cell phone hadn't gone off with the news. Sören wondered what would have happened if they'd kissed... if they would have ended up having sex, or pushing each other away. Now was absolutely not the time to talk about the almost-kiss, and what it meant - where they would go from here - even as the tension hung between them, as sharp as the knives Sören had shattered. Sören desperately wanted a hug, to burrow himself in Anthony's arms, but he knew that was playing with fire.

Anthony stretched and looked at the time. "Do you want anything from the vending machine?"

Sören wasn't hungry, but he knew he probably did need to eat and drink something after the workout, especially if they were going to be here for awhile. Before he could answer, a nurse came out in mint green scrubs. "Mr. Kierkegaard?"

It took Sören a few seconds to register the nurse was talking to him. "Hi," Sören said, straightening his posture.

"If you'd like to be present in the delivery room, please come with me."

Sören gave Anthony an apologetic look. "I can wait awhile," Anthony said, nodding, reaching out to take Sören's hand and squeeze before Sören walked off with the nurse.

Once again, Anthony's touch made Sören giddy and stupid, and Sören made himself get it together, taking deep breaths to calm his nerves. Frankie had opted for a natural childbirth, and he and Margrét had taken turns going to childbirth classes with Frankie in evenings. Sören tried to tell himself that plenty of people did this and they were fine, and Frankie would be fine, but he couldn't shake the anxiety.

Sören himself had assisted in childbirth a few times when he was an intern at a hospital in a small town in western Iceland, before the nervous breakdown that made him quit medical school. His mind's eye played back those moments as he put on his own set of mint green scrubs, donned a mask, and washed his hands. *She'll get through this. You can do this. Do it for her.* But his days as an intern had been almost two decades ago, and while Sören retained a surprising amount of knowledge from his days as a hospital intern, he nonetheless felt unqualified. He knew he wasn't officially performing as a doctor or nurse, even if he was dressing like they were - he was just there to watch and offer support to Frankie. But the official feeling the scrubs gave him intensified his anxiety - he started to have a flashback of the woman who died in the emergency room during his internship, who looked like his mother, and despite all his efforts he couldn't save her - it wasn't the first time he'd lost a patient but it was the one that broke him, bringing on a career crisis followed by an existential crisis and a suicide attempt. By the time he walked into the delivery room where he could hear Frankie grunting and swearing as she pushed, Sören's heart was pounding and his hands were shaking.

Focus. Sören took some more deep breaths and waved at Frankie.

Frankie let out a strangled cry of pain as another contraction hit. Across their Force bond, Sören could feel it - not as intensely as Frankie could feel it, there was a sort of shield or filter in place, but nonetheless it was a twinge that made Sören's legs wobble. He knew it was worse for Frankie and he hated that this was causing so much physical distress, which in turn was creating mental distress. Frankie was scared too; Sören knew she hadn't anticipated for it to feel like this.

Now Sören was thinking about that last patient he couldn't save, again... and his mind's eye started replaying the nightmares of Frankie going up in flames. Then his mind's eye replayed Sören finding his mother dead on the couch, what had been officially reported as a brain aneurysm but Sören now knew was a result of being attacked by Odin. His mother, who had been Míriel Þerindë reborn as mortal. Míriel, who had died giving birth to Fëanáro, something that Finwë had blamed him for and never forgiven him.

A flashback of Sören's life as Fëanor, worrying every single time Nerdanel gave birth to their children. Even after having given birth five times before, Fëanor still panicked when Nerdanel went into labor for the sixth and last time, with the Ambarussa; he panicked especially hard then, knowing twins were more exhausting than a single birth.

Frankie wasn't Nerdanel, of course - Sören didn't want to speculate on Nerdanel right now, as that part of Fëanor's past was painful, moreso for Nerdanel being painted in canon as some kind of long-suffering saint when Sören remembered her as somewhat abusive. But nonetheless, Frankie was one of the Noldor reborn - his own sister Lalwen - and the Doom hung over her like the rest of them. *Tears unnumbered ye shall shed.* Sören swallowed hard, wondering if the Valar had arranged for her to die in childbirth, just like Míriel had, to punish them both.

And of course, Frankie hadn't taken the blood from Flóki while he was around.

Flóki, who had claimed to once be an Elf, the twin of Nerdanel, fostered out in childhood,

before he was captured by Morgoth and turned into a Balrog... where Odin freeing him and healing him had brought about Loki's oath of blood-brotherhood, given under duress. Sören once again felt angry that Flóki had left Frankie the way he did, that he wasn't here now... and he wondered if that oath of loyalty Flóki had taken to him was actually genuine or if he'd been a spy for Odin all along. Sören knew Odin would probably be quite interested in the news of Frankie's pregnancy, and how that could be used as a weapon against Fëanor, the Fenrir-wolf of prophecy. Sören hoped that suspicion was only paranoia, and that if Flóki was no longer on their side, at least he might still be harboring resentment against Odin. But Sören didn't know what to think now, with the way Flóki and Ingwion had gone back to Asgard so abruptly... and bitterly.

He just knew that it wasn't the Valar he had to watch out for, it was Odin too. Odin had killed his mother. It would be like him to kill Frankie.

Sören's fists clenched; he was shaking like a leaf now. He was only half-present in the delivery room, his mind racing with morbid thoughts. At last he felt a pull, and his eyes met his sister's, cold steel above her mask.

Sören, get the fuck out of here. Your anxiety is making it worse for her.

Frankie cried out again as another contraction hit.

Now Sören felt a twinge of guilt, along with the ripple of filtered pain. He knew, of course, that the Force bond went both ways, and if he could feel Frankie's distress and a touch of the contractions, she could probably feel his anxiety and that was very likely making the pain worse. Sören's heart hammered in his ears and he felt like he was being suffocated, his anxiety even stronger at the thought that he had caused any increased stress and pain, *I hurt her just like I hurt Míriel... if she dies in childbirth it'll be my fault...*

Sören cleared his throat. "I, ah. I'm having a panic attack, sorry," he announced, and then he bolted out of there, pulling down his mask and gasping for breath in the hall.

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Once he was back in the waiting room, Sören tried desperately to shield himself, and get his anxiety under control, not wanting to make things worse for Frankie. But his anxiety was still high, and Anthony noticed.

"Should I take you back home? I'm sure someone will call you when the baby's here," Anthony said.

Sören shook his head vehemently. "I need to be here."

Anthony sighed. "Well... you need some distracting. You at least want to go for a walk around the hospital grounds? Maybe a little run?"

They did - Sören was still in his scrubs and he felt a bit ridiculous, but couldn't dwell on it too much, his thoughts returning again and again to Frankie in the delivery room, hoping she'd be all right... angry with himself for not merely being useless in the delivery room, but making things worse.

The hours wore on, and Anthony and Sören went for a few walks and sprints. Anthony took him to the cafe to get coffee - "even though caffeine probably isn't what you need

right now," Anthony said with a frown.

Then, Anthony looked at the time and frowned. "I have to go feed my cat," Anthony said.

Sören didn't want Anthony's cat going hungry, but nonetheless it was all he could do not to throw himself at Anthony, cling and cry, begging him not to go, not to leave him alone. "I'll come back in a bit, after I check in on the kitty," Anthony said, tousling Sören's curls. Their eyes met and Anthony looked over his shoulder as he left, waving as long as he could.

Sören's anxiety went through the roof again with Anthony gone. He tried to look at a magazine but his thoughts kept going back to finding his mother dead... thinking about Míriel dying in childbirth... his nightmares of Frankie going up in flames. Sören tried to do deep breathing exercises, tried to meditate, but that just made him focus even more on his worries.

Just before Sören could take out his phone and text Dooku and Maglor, asking one of them to come to the hospital, the doors of the lift opened and Ali walked out, with Maglor in tow. Sören stood up and Ali ran to him; Maglor walked, but quickly.

Ali and Maglor both hugged him tight. "Nicolaas and Kenny are with the kids," Maglor said before Sören could ask.

"Anthony asked us to come," Ali said. "We were thinking about stopping by the hospital later but Anthony texted and asked us to do it now, while he was out."

Sören gave a wry smile, touched by that thoughtful gesture on Anthony's part - angry at himself for thinking of Anthony as being sort of like a security blanket, his anxiety all the stronger n Anthony's absence.

"Here," Maglor said. He sat and patted his lap. "Come sit on my lap for awhile."

Sören did, and was comforted by Maglor's arms around him. Maglor began to rock Sören, and pet his curls. "Relax," Maglor said, his voice soothing, bringing down Sören's anxiety just a little. "It will be all right."

You don't know that. But Sören wasn't going to argue with him; he felt almost hypnotized by Maglor's voice.

"That's right," Maglor said, pulling Sören against his shoulder, petting him some more. "Just relax. Take it easy. Everything will be all right."

Sören could almost believe it, in that sweet, sultry voice of his.

Ali showed them some funny cat videos on YouTube on her phone until Anthony came back. Anthony stood for a moment, looking at Sören sitting on Maglor's lap, and Sören could feel wistfulness. Before Sören could get up and hug Anthony - or more - Anthony cleared his throat and gestured to his watch. "If you haven't eaten yet, we should get dinner," Anthony said.

The hospital cafe didn't have the most exciting selection of food, but it was food, and it was close. Sören had egg salad sandwiches and a chicken Caesar salad, which he picked at, feeling too keyed up to eat, but making himself eat anyway because he knew not eating would just make his anxiety worse.

"This takes me back to when I had the twins," Ali said between mouthfuls of her Cobb salad. "I questioned my sanity the entire time I was in labor, 'why am I putting myself through this shit again?' But then when they were here..." Ali smiled fondly, her eyes soft. "Seeing them for the first time, holding them... it was all worth it."

"I'm glad," Maglor said, reaching out to put his hand on hers.

Sören wondered if the child Ali suspected she was carrying was Kenny's, or Maglor's. He knew it didn't really matter, but he was curious anyway. He kept that curiosity to himself as he sipped at his Sprite... and then he felt that twinge of guilt again, this time that Frankie was going through all the hell of labor and she wasn't even really going to keep the baby. She would still be involved in the child's life to an extent, visiting regularly, but it was different than being a custodial parent. Sören hoped Frankie would at least feel some happiness once the baby was here, and not that it had all been for nothing.

The hours wore on. Eventually Sören climbed off Maglor's legs to stretch. Sören got a text from Dooku.

If you need anything, please let me know. I love you.

Sören smiled at the text. He wished Dooku was here too - Dooku was like his big teddy bear, Sören felt so safe in his arms - but he knew someone had to stay with the kids.

"Do you want to go for another walk?" Anthony asked.

Sören nodded.

As they headed outside, Sören looked up at the full moon and felt another twinge of guilt - this time that Anthony had been here with him for hours and hours; Sören knew the hospital wasn't exactly a fun place to be. "You know, you can go home," Sören told him. He gave a wry smile. "I don't want your cat to get pissed off at you."

Anthony chuckled. "He's probably already pissed off at me. He was especially whiny when I came back to feed him, and climbed on me, not wanting me to go."

"Awwww, poor baby. I mean it, though." Their eyes met, and held. "I really appreciate that you've stayed this long, but if you want to go back home I understand."

"I want to make sure you're all right. I know that labor takes quite awhile and you're probably not going to fully calm down until the baby's here."

"No," Sören said, knowing the truth. Maglor's presence had helped*a lot*, but there was still that simmering anxiety, and even though Sören knew it was perfectly normal for childbirth to take many hours, he still felt like it was unduly long - it was after eleven PM now, he'd gotten the call about Frankie's water breaking just before noon - and he couldn't quite shake the feeling that something was wrong. "But it's late. The baby might not get here till four, five in the morning. Are you really going to stay that long? And I don't want you to be so tired you're too impaired to drive."

"There is that." Anthony nodded. "If you're sure -"

Sören wasn't - even though Maglor's voice had that magical quality to bring his anxiety down, Anthony being there was still comforting, and Sören not only would miss him but now he had to worry about Anthony driving in the middle of the night. But Sören didn't want Anthony to feel obligated to stay there till the baby came, and need to take a cab

home and end up having his Audi towed or something. "It's OK."

They headed back to the waiting room and Anthony told Ali and Maglor, "I'm going to go home now. He insists." He glanced over at Sören, then back at them.

"We can take it from here," Maglor said, nodding. "Thank you for looking out for him."

Anthony turned back to Sören, and Sören knew Anthony was going to hug him, and Sören fought the urge to kiss him, to finish what they almost started this morning - they didn't need to make things even more complcated right now - and just before they could hug, one of the doctors who had been attending Frankie in the delivery room approached.

Sören's heart skipped a beat. He wondered if the baby had arrived.

"Mr. Kierkegaard?" The doctor's face was neutral, but Sören could see concern in her eyes. "There's some complications and we're about to perform a C-section."

Sören's heart sank. *I knew there was something wrong.*He opened his mouth to speak, but no sound came out. He couldn't make words. He couldn't even think. The room began fading to grey, and he felt as if he had been turned to jelly; his legs gave out and he dropped to the floor.

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Sören came to a few minutes later - he had been maneuvered into a chair in the waiting room. The doctor was running a few basic tests - making Sören follow her finger, count how many fingers she was holding up.

"I hope you're not going to drag me off for brain scans and shit," Sören heard himself growl.

The doctor gave a small smile. "If you knew how many times I've seen the father-to-be faint..." She chuckled. "I'm sure there's nothing wrong, you're just having a case of nerves."

"Jesus," Sören said. "Emergency C-section?"

"Yes. Please try not to worry too much - it'll be over soon, Mary will be fine, and so will your baby." The doctor got up. "Someone will be out to notify you once the baby is here."

Once the doctor went back down the hall, Sören heard himself whispering "oh god. oh god. oh god." His heart was hammering in his ears. He knew, of course, that plenty of people survived C-sections, and the doctors knew what they were doing, but he still felt like his world was crashing down around him. "I knew this was going to happen," Sören said, even though he didn't know this *specifically* was going to happen, he only knew he'd had a bad feeling about all of this. "I knew this was going to happen..." Sören swallowed hard, eyes brimming with tears as he remembered his sister's anger in the delivery room. *Sören, get the fuck out of here, you're just making it worse.*"Oh god. This is my fault, I made her stressed out, because of our For -"

He almost let the words "Force bond" slip, and Maglor put his hand on Sören's mouth just in time. Anthony looked around the waiting room, a bit nervous, but the only other people were on the other side of the waiting room wrapped up in their own conversation, and the

receptionist was watching a video on her phone. Anthony turned back to Sören, whose panic was intensified by his near-slip. Sören knew that the average person wouldn't know what he meant by "Force bond", but he still didn't want to take any chances.

"OK," Ali said. She pursed her lips and folded her arms. "This calls for alcohol."

"I agree," Maglor said. "I was just about to suggest that."

"What...?" Sören couldn't believe what he was hearing.

Anthony got up to notify the receptionist they were leaving, and to text or call Sören when the baby arrived. Before Sören could protest, Ali and Maglor were dragging him towards the lift; Anthony followed. "I have to stay here and wait for the baby," Sören said just before Ali shoved him into the lift.

Once the lift doors closed, Ali turned to Sören and said, "Her needing an emergency C-section isn't your fault. These things happen, and there would be complications whether or not your stress added to hers. But you staying here and working yourself into even more of a panic might cause a scene, and we don't need that."

"No," Anthony said. "That's the opposite of keeping a low profile."

"Are you coming with us?" Ali asked.

Anthony nodded. "I might as well."

"Don't get so drunk you can't drive," Sören said.

"I wasn't planning on it. I don't really like getting drunk in public anyway, I prefer to keep my wits about me." Anthony put a hand on Sören's shoulder. "You, on the other hand... need to take your mind off things."

They all rode in Ali's Land Rover, and when they spotted a bar with a sign that advertised Friday karaoke night, Ali pulled in. "I hope we're not too late for it," Ali said, glancing at the time - it was just after midnight.

That concern was answered as soon as they walked in the door, and a very drunk middle-aged woman was belting out "Wrecking Ball" by Miley Cyrus, off-key. Maglor facepalmed - Sören knew that off-key notes were physically painful to him - and Maglor marched Sören right to the bar.

Four tequila shots later, Maglor decided to have a go at the microphone. He sang the song he'd performed at Margrét and Frankie's wedding party back in 2019... back when they were all in Iceland, and things felt hopeful, over a year before Dag was taken and Sören was flung all the way to Australia knowing nothing was certain except they had to look over their shoulders for the rest of their lives. It seemed that the choice of song was deliberate, as if Maglor was trying to tell Sören to hold onto hope, the promise of a better future.

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

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's beautiful voice stirred the crowd; some people flicked lighters. By the time the song was over there were very few dry eyes, and Maglor got a standing ovation and people yelling for more. Maglor sang another song from that party in 2019; Sören smiled a little, remembering the way he'd teased Maglor about it later, and chosen it as his ringtone for Maglor's number.

Hast du etwas Zeit für mich?
Dann singe ich ein Lied für dich
Von 99 Luftballons
Auf ihrem Weg zum Horizont
Denkst du vielleicht grad an mich?
Dann singe ich ein Lied für dich
Von 99 Luftballons
Und, dass sowas von sowas kommt

Sören had another shot of tequila while Maglor sang. He knew he was going to be paying for it with a hangover, but it seemed like a small price to pay to avoid having a panic meltdown in public, especially one where he would accidentally, inadvertently use the Force without thinking about it. They didn't need another emergency move on short notice, and Sören felt bad enough, still convinced that his anxiety across their Force bond had caused complications with labor, even though he knew logically that probably wasn't why and it would have happened anyway. All he could think of was Fëanor's memories of Finwë laying into him over and over again for "killing his mother".

*I am definitely getting a vasectomy when this is over,*Sören thought to himself. *If there are any more of the family who intend to join us and aren't here yet, they're going to have to get in some other way.*

Then, through his drunken haze, he remembered that he couldn't have surgery because of the way his body speed-healed from wounds now that he was immortal. He and Frankie were going to need to use condoms or get her on birth control. Sören didn't mind that so much, but being reminded that he couldn't do "normal people things" like have a vasectomy was a particularly sore spot right now.

When Maglor finished his song, people were once again trying to get him to perform another, but Maglor shook his head. He ordered another round of tequila for both himself and Sören. Ali and Anthony had both limited their drinks to one - Ali wasn't much of a drinker, considering its history with the Aboriginal population, and Sören remembered what Anthony said about not wanting to drink too much in public. Sören noticed that Anthony kept looking around the bar, as if he were anticipating trouble - never able to completely let go of those instincts honed by the service, and MI6. Sören felt bad for Anthony that he couldn't just *relax* somewhere like this, but was always on the alert.

Their eyes met. Sören's cheeks burned, thinking about that almost-kiss. He was starting to feel drunk enough to lose his inhibitions, wanting to go over there and kiss him. Before he could act on that impulse, Sören's phone vibrated.

It was the hospital. Sören swiped to accept, heart pounding.*Please don't let her be dead. Please don't let the baby be dead. Please, please...* "Hello?"

"Hello, Mr. Kierkegaard? This is Doctor Singh." It was the doctor who had announced the emergency C-section in the waiting room.

"Hi, yes?"

"Congratulations, you have a baby boy, 4.2 kilograms. He and Mary are just fine."

Sören let out a scream and then he clapped his hand over his mouth. "Sorry," he said.

The doctor chuckled. "Mary is resting, and I'd suggest letting her sleep for awhile."

"OK. But... she's OK?"

"Yes, she is."

"OK... thank you."

"You're welcome."

The call ended and Sören sat there for a moment, dazed. Then he felt a flood of relief - hit harder by the alcohol in his system - and he started laughing and crying. *Frankie's OK. The baby's OK. Frankie didn't die...*

"Is everything all right?" Ali asked.

"Frankie's fine, and... I have a son," Sören said. He fell apart again.

Ali hugged him, then Anthony hugged him tight. Before Sören could think to give Anthony a kiss, Anthony pulled back and now Maglor was hugging him too.

Sören went over to the bartender. "A round of drinks on the house," he said, and took out his credit card.

A very drunk, bald man, wearing business casual with his tie undone and draped around his shoulders, was singing Jefferson Starship, slurring his words and doing a jerky, awkward dance:

Marconi plays the mamba, listen to the radio, don't you remember?
We built this city, we built this city on rock and roll
We built this city, we built this city on rock and roll
Built this city, we built this city on rock and roll

Sören found himself not able to take it. He went over, took away the microphone, and said, "I'm happy for you, and I'mma let you finish, but Journey was the greatest 80s cheese band of all time! OF ALL TIME!" Then Sören handed the microphone back to the bald guy and approached the DJ. "After he's done I want 'Don't Stop Believin'."

As soon as the bald man was done, Sören took the microphone and smiled as the familiar opening notes came on. A few people booed him, and then a man shushed his booing friends and said, "That guy ordered drinks on the house, shut up."

Just a small-town girl
Livin' in a lonely world
She took the midnight train goin' anywhere

Just a city boy
Born and raised in South Detroit
He took the midnight train goin' anywhere

A singer in a smokey room
The smell of wine and cheap perfume
For a smile they can share the night
It goes on and on, and on, and on

Strangers waiting
Up and down the boulevard
Their shadows searching in the night

Maglor rolled his eyes but he was grinning - Maglor had been present when Sören did karaoke to this song in Reykjavik back in 2011. Sören was glad he could still hit the high notes, noticing his voice had dropped about an octave since the last time he'd performed this song. Sören strutted around, getting into it, wanting to express his joy. His eyes met Anthony's as he sang:

Don't stop believin'
Hold on to that feelin'
Streetlight people

When the song was over Sören, too, got a standing ovation. Before he could perform an encore, or another song, Ali was dragging him away. "I think we better go now," Ali said.

"Awwww, come on..."

But now Maglor and Anthony were helping to escort him out, like a pair of bouncers. Sören tried to take it in stride. "I wanna go see baby," Sören said, hearing the slur in his speech. "I wanna see my kid."

They were rolling down the street and Sören looked at the streetlights and people walking up and down the sidewalk and rolled down the window and started singing at the passerby:

Strangers waiting
Up and down the boulevard
Their shadows searching in the night

Streetlights people
Livin' just to find emotion
Hidin' somewhere in the night

Don't stop believin'
Hold on to that feelin'
Streetlight people

Ali hit a button to roll up Sören's window.

When they got to the hospital parking lot, they drove to where Anthony had parked his Audi, and Ali said to Anthony, "There you are. You're OK to drive, yeh?"

Anthony nodded. "I just had the one mojito."

Sören was about to get out of the car too, and Maglor stopped him. "Where do you think you're going?"

"To see my baby," Sören said.

Ali pursed her lips and shook her head. "Sören, you are *way* too drunk. I guarantee you they'll throw you out. We're going to take you home and you can sleep it off, and see the baby in the morning, OK?"

"AWWWWWWW NO COME ON," Sören shouted. He tugged on Ali's sleeve. "I WANNA GO SEE MY SON. THAT'S NOT FAIR. YOU SHOULDN'T HAVE TAKEN ME OUT TO GET ME DRUNK IF YOU KNEW I WAS GONNA BE TOO DRUNK TO GO SEE THE BABY -"

"Sören, you know as well as I do that if we didn't distract you, you probably would have had a slip with Force use in public," Maglor said.

Sören *did* know that and he was still annoyed. "I wanna see my baby."

"You can see the baby in the morning. I promise, first thing in the morning," Ali said. "Besides, then you can see Frankie when she wakes up."

"Thank fuck she made it," Sören said. He started crying again, thinking of his nightmares about her burning to death. "I was so afraid I was gonna lose her..."

Anthony reached in and patted him. "My mum had me by unplanned C-section too. She had planned a natural childbirth but I hear I was difficult."

Sören snorted. Then he gave Anthony a little shove. "You could have told me that when I was freaking out."

"I doubt it would have done any good before we, ah, distracted you," Anthony said.

"It was a fun distraction," Sören admitted. Then he turned back to Ali and Maglor. "You better let me get out and see my baby, or so help me god, I will sing Miley Fucking Cyrus."

"Sören..." Maglor and Ali exchanged amused-but-annoyed glances.

Sören sang at the top of his lungs:

I CAME IN LIKE A WRECKING BALL
I NEVER HIT SO HARD IN LOVE
ALL I WANTED WAS TO BREAK YOUR WALLS
ALL YOU EVER DID WAS WRECK ME
YEAH YOU, YOU WRECK ME

Ali scratched her locks and then she gave Anthony an apologetic look. "Would you mind letting him crash at your place tonight? He might be a bit too drunk to take home, wake up the whole house..."

Anthony snickered. He opened Sören's car door and pulled him out. "Come on, you, let's go see my cat," Anthony said.

Sören needed help to walk to Anthony's Audi; he couldn't walk in a straight line. Anthony put an arm around Sören's waist to guide him. Sören felt like this was definitely playing with fire. He started singing again, more earnestly:

I put you high up in the sky
And now, you're not coming down
It slowly turned, you let me burn
And now, we're ashes on the ground

Don't you ever say I just walked away
I will always want you
I can't live a lie, running for my life
I will always want you

"You are *so* fucking drunk," Anthony said as he helped Sören into the car. He buckled Sören in, still laughing.

"Don't laugh at me," Sören said, but he was laughing too.

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Sören could barely make it up the stairs to Anthony's flat, almost falling when they were halfway there, despite holding onto Anthony. Anthony finally stopped him, looked around to make absolutely sure nobody was watching, picked Sören up off the stair, and carried him up the remainder of the steps to the door.

As soon as they got in, Craig began to howl like he'd been neglected for days instead of mere hours. "Yes, yes, *I know*, I'm sorry," Anthony told the cat. He gestured to his couch. "Sören, sit down."

Craig had that same idea, and meowed with protest as Sören awkwardly flomped himself down, bolting out of the way just in time. Then Craig followed Anthony into the kitchen, and Sören watched with amusement as Craig circled Anthony's ankles, hollering as Anthony opened a can of food. "Jesus Christ, cat," Anthony muttered.

Once the cat was distracted with his food, Anthony sat in the armchair. He and Sören just looked at each other for a moment, and then Anthony had a disapproving look on his face.

"What?" Sören narrowed his eyes.

"That couch. It's really too small for you to sleep on."

"It don't fold out?" Sören realized he'd made a grammatical error - he was that drunk - but before he could correct himself, Anthony shook his head.

"No," Anthony said. He sighed. "Well, I'll go... fetch you something to wear to bed. We're

not that far apart in size."

Sören wondered how true that was and licked his lips, thinking about Anthony's cock. He closed his eyes and entertained some fantasies of them not going to sleep right away, sucking and fucking each other, and then he felt a T-shirt and pajama bottoms flung at him.

"Go change," Anthony said. "If you normally take a shower before bed I'd ask you to skip that tonight because I'm worried about you falling in the shower when you're this drunk."

Sören pulled off his shirt right away and Anthony said, "Bathroom's down the hall."

Sören wondered why Anthony didn't want him to get naked right there, swearing under his breath as he staggered to the hall, walking into the wall before he made it to the bathroom. He found himself sniffing the T-shirt and pajama bottoms before he put them on - he knew they were clean, they smelled vaguely of the laundry soap Anthony used... but they also sort of smelled like him, which Sören enjoyed. He was definitely a little horny, and he leered when he found Anthony sitting on the edge of his bed, the sheets turned down, waiting.

"Get in here," Anthony said.

Anthony took the side of the bed closest to the window, and Sören climbed in the other side. Sören thought about leaning over and kissing Anthony, but Anthony turned off the light immediately, and then Craig hopped onto him, purring loudly.

"Hello," Sören said, skritching the cat. "Great timing."

Anthony pulled up the covers around them. "Are you warm enough? Too warm?"

"I'm fine." Sören propped himself up on one elbow and ran a finger down Anthony's chest. "Though it is pretty hot in here, if you know what I mean."

"Sören..."

A part of Sören was screaming not to go there,*he's mortal, you're not, this is only going to end in pain,* but he wanted too much. Needed too much. "Fuck me," Sören husked.

"Sören." Anthony turned on the light and gave Sören a stern look. "You are very, very, very, very, very, very, very, very, very desirable... and very, very, very, very, very, very, very, very, very drunk."

Sören pouted.

"Look." Anthony sighed. "You're too drunk to consent. You're also... not in a good place right now, so even if you weren't drunk, I would feel like I was taking advantage of you when you're vulnerable. We can revisit this conversation some other time when we're both sober and things have calmed down."

*Are things ever going to calm down?*Sören felt crushed, but he also understood Anthony's point - if the situation were reversed he would also think Anthony was too drunk to consent. Anthony may have been a killer, but he also had morals, and that was one of the things Sören appreciated about him. One of the things that made him feel safe around Anthony, when the entire world seemed unsafe.

Anthony patted him and turned off the light.

Sören was drunk enough that he was also a bit sleepy - he realized that, too, was a good enough reason to not have sex tonight. But he'd had such an emotional rollercoaster ride all day, between worrying about Frankie and the baby, and now Anthony rejecting him - even gently, even just for now - that he couldn't fall asleep right away. Instead, the exhaustion made the dam break and he started crying again, not able to help it.

Anthony scooted closer, reached out, and pulled Sören against him. "Shhhh." Anthony rubbed Sören's back with one hand, pet his curls with the other. It felt so good, so *right* to be in Anthony's arms like this, that Sören just cried harder, aching for him. "You've had a rough day," Anthony said, his own voice husky with emotion. "Try to rest now. In the morning I'll take you to see the baby and Frankie, OK?"

Sören nodded. He continued to sob for awhile and Anthony just held him and pet him. When the sobs subsided, Anthony started rocking him a little.

"It's OK," Anthony whispered. His arms tightened around Sören; Sören snuggled into Anthony's chest, listening to his heartbeat. "You got through this. Everything turned out OK. I know things have felt hopeless after what happened to your brother, but there's still hope." He patted Sören and sang, "*Don't stop believin'...*"

"Your voice is a little too deep for that song." Sören chuckled; Anthony was a baritone.

"Yeah, I know." Anthony skritched Sören's curls like he was a cat. Sören felt Anthony reaching out to also skritch Craig. Craig began to knead Sören's back, purring harder. "Go to sleep, Sören. Everything will be better in the morning."

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"Fuck. Me," Sören groaned, and this time it had nothing to do with wanting sex.

His head was throbbing. Sören squinted against the daylight, though Anthony had courteously drawn the curtains to minimize the sunlight in the room, knowing Sören would be hung over. Craig was on the bed next to him - Craig began to headbutt him, purring away - and Sören heard Anthony's voice down the hall, like he was on the phone. Sören could only make out bits and pieces of words.

The conversation ended, and Anthony came down the hall. When he saw Sören sitting up, holding his head, moaning in pain, Anthony put a hand on his hip. "I was just about to wake you. That was Nicolaas on the phone, wanting to make sure you're all right."

"Oh boy." Sören hadn't informed Dooku he was spending the night - that decision had been made for him - though he was sure Maglor or Ali told him.

"He knows you just slept here," Anthony said.

Sören nodded. He was absolutely sure Dooku knew his feelings for Anthony and wouldn't object if they had gone there, but it was the sort of thing Sören would have preferred to discuss with him first, rather than just assume... and despite Sören's wanting to throw caution to the wind last night, that was not a conversation Sören wanted to have anytime soon. He thought of how he panicked over Frankie, and knew he'd be panicking over Anthony even more if they crossed that line, with the dangers in Anthony's line of work.

While he still wished Maglor hadn't left back in 2014, he understood now the mindset that prompted Maglor to leave, and Sören hated that he understood.

"You must have quite the hangover," Anthony said, "so I'll make you some coffee and give you something for it and we can go?"

"I need clothes," Sören said, looking down at the pajama bottoms he'd borrowed from Anthony.

"Right," Anthony said. "You can borrow something of mine."

Anthony stepped out. Sören decided he could shower when he got home - he didn't want to make the temptation any stronger - and he went through Anthony's closet and dresser. It felt strangely intimate, and seeing Anthony's selection of boxer-briefs did nothing to calm his libido.

When Sören was dressed, going with a charcoal grey T-shirt and black jeans, he came out. Anthony had coffee waiting for him and had made Sören a couple of breakfast burritos with scrambled egg and melted cheese. "Because you should eat something to take this," Anthony said, passing over a bottle of aspirin.

Sören gave a wry smile as he uncapped the bottle. "I'm not sure medicine works on me the same way, after... you know."

"Right," Anthony said. "Well, we know alcohol works, so... feel free to try."

Sören took two aspirin and then he looked at the plate of food. "Thank you," he said.

"I'm not much of a cook," Anthony said with an apologetic little frown as he sat down.

"It smells good." Sören took a bite. "It is good," he said with his mouth full, meaning it.

Anthony smiled.

Craig came over to beg. Anthony gave the cat an exasperated look. "I just fed you literally a half-hour ago."

"Meow," Craig whined.

Anthony rolled his eyes.

"He wants different food," Sören said. "He wants my food."

"Well, he can't have that, it has hot sauce on it." Anthony wagged his finger at Craig. "No."

Craig jumped on Anthony and climbed onto his shoulder, purring. Sören laughed with his mouth full, getting some egg on himself, as Craig hung off Anthony's shoulder and began to headbutt Anthony aggressively, while Anthony had a pained look on his face.

Sören's head was still killing him, but he was determined to go meet his son and make sure Frankie was still OK. Anthony let him borrow a pair of sunglasses as they went outside into the bright winter sun.

They didn't talk much on the way to the hospital - Anthony gave Sören space with his thoughts and feelings, which were too many. Sören had mostly stopped worrying about

Frankie's health but now he felt like an idiot for being so worked up yesterday - not merely being useless but being an emergency of his own, that necessitated hauling off to a bar. "I'm sorry about last night," Sören said. "I hope you slept OK."

"I did, though I kept waking up to make sure you were OK."*Watching you sleep,* Anthony broadcasted.

Sören felt touched by that, but now was not the time for them to talk about Sören's drunken proposition. Sören just wanted to forget it happened, even as he still wanted Anthony, as badly as he'd wanted anything.

Sören almost ran once they were at the hospital. He managed to keep himself contained and walked as he was brought in to see Frankie, who was with the baby. But though Sören walked, no running, he found himself breaking down again at the sight of her - clearly drained but OK - and their child. *My son.*

Sören took a seat next to Frankie, leaned in and gave her a hug and a kiss. "How's my girl?"

"Eh." Frankie made a face. "I've seen better days." She smirked at Sören. "You look like shit."

"I got drunk last night," Sören said. "I'm sorry I wasn't here, I panicked -"

"I know." Frankie reached out to squeeze his arm. "It's OK."

No, it's not. I feel responsible for -

Frankie shook her head. *I don't think your panic was responsible for this git deciding he was going to come out in a weird position.* "Here, meet your son."

Sören gingerly took the baby from Frankie, fresh tears spilling down his cheeks as he got a good look. The baby was born with a full head of black hair... like his. Sören knew of course that if the baby had been born with red hair that didn't mean it was really Flóki's, and he knew that black hair didn't 100% prove the child was his and not Flóki's. Loki had claimed to have made himself infertile by magic after "the Sleipnir incident", but Sören didn't know if he entirely believed that. He also knew the paternity didn't really matter - if the child was Flóki's, he didn't believe in holding children accountable for their parents' misdeeds. But the baby looked like his, not just with the dark hair, but Sören had seen a couple of baby pictures of himself and seemed to recall he looked a bit like the way the boy looked now. And the baby *felt* like his, in a way that was impossible to explain, but Sören knew it when he felt it.

Blood sings.

"Hello," Sören said, cradling the baby, marveling at its tiny perfection.*We made this. I made this. My greatest work of art.* "You're beautiful."

"That better not be his name," Frankie teased.

Sören snorted. *Beautifulfinwë.*

You're a dick. Frankie looked towards the door, and back at Sören. "They've, ah... been getting at me to give a name, for the birth certificate. I told them to wait till you got here."

"Jesus, I can't believe they just... expect us to have a name immediately," Sören said.

Frankie nodded. "I mean, I'm sure they allow a few days but they're, you know. Pushy. Most couples have a name picked out already."

"We're not most couples."

"No shit."

"I'm shit at naming," Sören confessed.

"No shit." *The guy who named all his kids Somethingfinwë.*

Sören laughed, and then he got serious, looking down at his son again. "It's like... names are a big deal, trying to capture the essence of a person in a single word. Pictures are worth a thousand words... names are too simple. Nothing ever quite fits."

"We have to think of something."

Sören touched the baby boy's face. Though he had been very drunk last night, he remembered some of it - most particularly the flood of relief when the hospital called to let him know Frankie and the baby were OK, that surge of joy, the return of something like hope that had prompted him to take the mic and sing of that hope.

He had struggled with suicidal despair in his early twenties, and he despaired again after Maglor left... but the worst drop of all, for him, was when he was living a happy life with Maglor and Dooku in Iceland and it felt like everything was finally working out and then he felt the Dagorath in another universe - if a godlike Fëanor could not save his own, he felt like he didn't have a chance - and then Dag had been taken, and in the blink of an eye their entire life radically changed, with the move to Australia, new identities, always having to be so careful now. Sören had spent most of the first month after the Dagorath in a blanket heap, playing Stardew Valley, and he made himself keep away from that when he took custody of Dag's daughters, for the sake of the children. But things had still felt fraught and uneven, and then last night, it was like a ray of sun that burst through the clouds.

Ray. And then, *Not Ray.* "Hino Rei," Sören said, thinking of his love of*Sailor Moon* as a teenager. "It means Spirit of Fire in Japanese."

"He's not Japanese," Frankie said. "That's probably insensitive."

"Yeah, you're right." Sören cringed.

"Even though I'd just call him Junior." Frankie poked her tongue out.

A little lightbulb went off in Sören's head. What better to name a child that was a sign of hope in an existential crisis than... "Søren Kierkegaard."

"Are you fucking serious?"

"Deadly." Sören booped the baby's nose.

Dooku came in then. He gave Frankie a hug and then he leaned over Sören and spent a moment marveling at the baby. "He's precious," Dooku said. He glanced at Sören. "Have you chosen a name?"

Sören nodded. "Søren."

"Søren." Dooku's eyebrows shot up. "Søren Kierkegaard."

"Yes."

Sören let Dooku hold the baby; Dooku shook with silent laughter that became less silent, and the baby gurgled. *You're naming him Junior.*

Pretty much.

Dooku smiled tenderly at the baby, which made Sören smile too - Sören found Dooku's paternal side quite attractive. Then Dooku smiled at Sören, and back at the baby. *Hello there, Curufin. So nice to see you again.*

Chapter 29

Sören opened the door before Ali could put her key in the lock. He was wearing little Søren in a baby sling; Kate and Tori were toddling around in a playpen, playing with blocks.

Ali and Kenny had just returned from Ali's first prenatal exam; Metallica and Megadeth had come along to the doctor's office and they had gone for ice cream afterwards. Metallica was still working on her cone. Ali handed Sören a cup of vanilla soft-serve with rainbow sprinkles. Sören's face lit up. "*Takk*," he said as he took the cup. The adults sat down - Metallica and Megadeth ran out to the backyard to play with Huan.

"So, how did it go?" Sören asked.

"It went," Ali said, chuckling. Kenny patted Ali's stomach. "I'm due in late February, early March, the doctor says."

Sören nodded. Then he grinned, and Ali pinched the bridge of her nose, knowing what was coming. "Hi Due In Late February, Early March -"

"Sören." Ali glared, but she couldn't help laughing.

"So, I know you're fond of making dad jokes and all..." Kenny smirked. "But you're about to be a grandpa. You need to get in some 'get off my lawn' practice."

"I think I said that to a certain jail crow, once," Sören quipped.

That reminded Ali. "Speaking of grandpas... I better call my da. I haven't told him yet."

"Oh! OK."

"You want to play Mario?" Kenny asked; Sören nodded.

Ali laughed as Kenny set up the console - the idea of Fëanor and Fingon playing Mario tickled her - and she stepped outside, watching Megadeth and Metallica play fetch with Huan some meters away. She dialed her father's number, knowing it was the middle of the day and he might be out with the sheep and not anywhere near a phone, but she was going to try anyway.

After four rings, her father answered. "Hello?"

"Da, it's me."

"Possum!"

"Hi, Da. How are you and Mum?"

"Apart from the old arthritis, life is good. What's going on? It's been awhile since you called last."

"Yeh, life has been kind of crazy. I have some news for you."

"Yeh? Big news?"

"You might want to sit down, if you're not."

"MEDIKA!" Böðvar yelled. "It's Alinta!"

"HELLO DEAR," Ali's mother called out.

"All right, she's nearby so I can tell her the news," Böðvar said.

Ali chuckled. "OK. I'm pregnant. Metallica and Megadeth are going to have a little brother or sister."

"Oh, *wonderful.* Medika, love, Ali's having another baby."

And then Medika was on the phone - Ali got the mental image of her using the Force to snatch the phone away from her husband, and that made her smile. "Congratulations, dear."

"Thank you."

"When are you due?"

"Late February or early March."

"Maybe one of us can come out when you're closer to the due date," Medika said.

"Maybe, though, you know, I don't want to inconvenience you. Kenny's good at taking care of me..."

"But he's just one person. It would be easier if two people were taking shifts -"

"Well..." Ali took a deep breath, not knowing how to broach the subject, but she knew it needed to be broached. "Our household is a bit bigger now."

"Oh? A bit bigger how?"

"Can you put Da back on?" It was going to be easier to explain this to her father than to her mother, as carefully as Ali would have to word things.

"Hi, Possum," Böðvar said.

"Hi. So... I have some other news for you. Can you*listen?*" Ali pushed with her mind, across the kilometers that separated them. *Like this.*

Go ahead.

"We're staying with some people, here in Sydney."*Your nephew Sören and his partners. His sister Margrét - Magnús is a girl now - is also living in Sydney, with her partner.*

"Oh!" *You finally got to meet them? Is the scientist still missing?*

"Yeh." *Dag's still missing, yes. It's why I have to tell you like this - MI6 relocated Sören and Margrét for their own safety. I have to be careful what I say over the phone.*

"How are you liking Sydney?" *Are you safe?*

"I kind of miss Adelaide from time to time... and Ceduna... but Sydney's nice. I have no complaints." *We're good. We have someone from MI6 looking out for us.* Ali smiled a little. *He's become like part of the family too.*

"I know your mum wants me or her to come out when you're due, but... that's a long time to be seein' ya. You think maybe you can come for a visit sooner than that? I miss you and would like to see you again." *And I'd like to see my niece and nephew, finally. It's been too long.*

"I think we can arrange that. Although, nothing immediate."

"No, I reckon you'd need some time to make travel plans. Hey, why don't you come out for your mum's birthday in October?"

"Oh... yeh, that sounds like a nice compromise between soon enough not to be a big wait, and long enough to make plans." It was August third, and Medika's birthday was October sixth.

"Lookin' at the calendar... the week of October third? Maybe stay for two weeks?"

"Two weeks might be better. I know the kids will have to take some time off school, but I'm sure I can arrange that without too much trouble."

"How many people are coming? We might be able to put you up at the guest house." There was an old, small three-bedroom house on the edge of her parents' sheep farm, mostly unused and a bit rundown, but sometimes one or more of Ali's brothers came to visit, or some of the extended family on her mother's side. Ali's brother Darren, who was now living with her parents again to help them run the farm as they got older, had suggested renting it out through Airbnb for tourists visiting that part of the outback, and though Böðvar wasn't thrilled with the idea he was letting Darren fix it up anyway.

"Me, Kenny, the kids, and if everyone I've mentioned comes along... five adults, three other kids."

"OK, if you and Kenny don't mind staying in the guest bedroom at our place, I think we can put everyone up in the guest house."

"Cool. I'll... let people know they're invited to come along, I can't promise they'll say yes but I don't think they'll say no."

"Good, good. I should let you go, and I'll tell your mum what's happening." *That she has a niece and nephew to meet.* "Thanks for callin', Possum."

"You're welcome, Da. Love you."

"Love you too."

Ali came back inside, realizing she'd made plans for Sören without consulting him first, but she had a feeling he wouldn't be upset in this particular instance. Margrét would be a harder sell, or maybe not - Ali got the sense an outback vacation might do Margrét and Frankie some good. Ali got herself a glass of lemonade, and then she decided to pour glasses for Sören and Kenny, and used the Force to sail them over as she took a seat.

"Hey," Kenny said, looking up from his game.

"Hi," Sören said. "So you talked to your father?"

Ali nodded. "Either my da or my mum is looking to come out around the time I'm due, but... they want a visit sometime before that." Ali met Sören's eyes. "That means all of us. You, and your sister. Your partners, and your kids."

Sören's eyebrows shot up. "I'd love to meet my uncle. Well... again. The last time I saw him I was about this high." Sören gestured to the arm of the couch.

"When does he want us to come out?" Kenny asked.

"Around Mum's birthday." She informed Sören, "That's October sixth, so we'd be going the week of October third. Possibly stay two weeks."

Sören stroked his chin. "I'll have to ask Anthony to petsit."

Ali felt a twinge of guilt then - she wished she'd told her parents six adults instead of five, feeling like Anthony should come along. But she knew Sören and Anthony were still doing that awkward dance around each other, not giving into their feelings, and she didn't know if it would be resolved in time for the trip.

Then Sören frowned. For an instant Ali wondered if he was in fact thinking of Anthony not being invited, and feeling bad, but she sensed a much darker mood, and braced herself. "Week of October third, you said?"

Ali nodded.

"Shit."

"Why... is something else going on?"

"Not exactly." Sören sighed. "You know how we all felt something fucky last October? On the ninth? Where I said we'd all felt ourselves die in another universe? That was the Dagor Dagorath happening in another universe."

Ali, of course, would never forget the terrible nightmare she'd had, and the weird weather and increase in bizarre, disruptive behavior around the world that followed for weeks afterwards. She didn't want to sound dismissive of Sören's concerns, but she also really wanted to see her parents again, and she didn't want him to stop himself from seeing his blood family - which she knew would be therapeutic for him after losing Dag, and after MI6 barring him from contacting Gitta and Ari. "What are the odds that there would be another Dagorath in another universe on the same date, and another round of... all of that?"

Sören shrugged. "I don't know, I just know it feels kind of... wrong... to be trying to go out and celebrate when -"

"As opposed to what, letting my mum sit alone on her birthday when she'd got her hopes up of seeing me - and meeting you?" Ali loved Sören, and she knew he was still having a hard time after everything, but she felt a little frustrated. *I used to be his son, and now it's like I'm his mum.* "Look. Sören. I'm going out to Ceduna in October whether you're coming or not. You, Nicolaas, and Maglor are all invited. I think, personally, one of the best ways to tell our enemies to fuck off is to try to reclaim that day and give it some positive

associations, instead of staying here moping about being all... demoralized, and shit."

Sören glared. Ali glared back. Then Sören looked down and nodded. "You're right. I just..." Sören sighed. "I'm paranoid, after everything that happened."

"Hi Paranoid After Everything That Happened -"

Sören used the Force to throw a pillow at her, and Ali used the Force to toss it back. The baby gurgled, and Sören booped his nose, smiling a little, before he got serious again. "I don't mean to be a pain in the ass. I'm... afraid."

"I know. But that's how they *want* us to feel." Ali squared her shoulders, angry in the general direction of anything that would threaten or harm her family. "We can't let them break us. So let's go to Ceduna and live a little, OK? You love kangaroos so much, wait till you're out there." Ali snorted. "Maybe you'll finally get sick of the fuckers."

"I doubt that." Sören smiled again. "So you said... my sister's invited too?"

Ali nodded. "I can tell her, or you can. The invitation includes Frankie."

"OK." Sören sipped his lemonade. "Now *they* could use a vacation."

"That was what I was thinking." Ali stroked her chin. "My parents have a guest house... Darren's been fixing it up, you'll probably meet him if not some of your other cousins... and there's enough room for all of you there but I wonder if maybe we should try to find a proper hotel for Margrét and Frankie, something, you know, more romantic."

"I'd be happy to fund that," Sören said. "I worry about their relationship, after everything."

"Yeh, I know they've had a rough time of it." The glass doors slid open and Metallica and Megadeth came back inside, with Huan bounding into the living room. "I hope Anthony can deal with a dog," Ali said.

Then Huan gave her sad eyes and whined, as if he knew he was being left behind. He climbed up on Ali and started aggressively licking her face.

"Ah, shit. You know what's happening, don't you?"

"What's happening?" Megadeth asked.

"We're gonna go see your grandma and grandpa in October," Ali said.

"Does that mean we get time off from school?" Metallica clapped her hands excitedly.

"Yeh, but only because it's a special occasion, it's your grandmother's fiftieth birthday."

Sören's eyes widened. "She's that young?"

"I was born in 1993, when my mum was twenty-two."

Megadeth started running around excitedly. "I'm gonna go to the outback! We're gonna go to the outback! Yayyyyyyyyyy!"

"Do they still have all those sheep?" Metallica asked.

"Yeh, they do," Ali said. She chuckled. "They probably have even more sheep since the last time you were there, now that Uncle Darren is helping."

Huan whined again and gave Ali the most pathetic sad face a dog had ever had. "Oh, shit." Ali petted him. "I guess we'll have to make travel arrangements that are dog-friendly."

"I guess so," Kenny said. He gestured for Huan to come over for pettings. "Whatcha think, boy? You want to go meet your, uh..." Kenny was trying to think of the relation.

Huan just yipped.

"Yeh? You want to meet Böðvar?" Ali asked.

Huan yipped again, hopped off Kenny, and wagged his tail excitedly, barking again and again. Then he whined again, as if to say he missed Böðvar, even though Ali knew they had never met.

"Awwwww. OK, that's settled, I guess you're coming with us," Ali said, reaching out to pet the dog some more.

Huan smiled, tongue lolling, and gave another happy bark.

—

After dinner, Ali gave Maglor and Dooku the news of her parents' invite to Ceduna in October. To her relief, Maglor and Dooku were much more supportive of the idea than Sören had initially been. Now Huan was climbing up on Maglor to give him the same sad, guilty face, as if Maglor needed to make the final decision about him going. "I suppose we should travel by car so we don't have to worry about taking this guy on a plane," Maglor said, giving Huan pats. Huan licked Maglor's hands as if to thank him. "About how many hours' drive are we looking at?" Before Ali could answer, Maglor took out his phone and looked at Google Maps. Then he made a face. "Hells, twenty-one hours one way."

Ali nodded.

"I've driven that kind of distance before," Maglor said; he looked at Sören and Dooku, who nodded. "When we went to Canada to pick up the girls... I drove all the way from Fort Smith in the Northwest Territories, to Thunder Bay Ontario, and back. In the middle of Canadian winter, no less."

"It was an epic road trip," Sören said. "Let's not ever fucking do that again."

Maglor chuckled. "We mostly managed to avoid an incident."

"Mostly?" Ali was curious.

"We got pulled over by a Mountie at one point. I put on my best fake Canadian accent and convinced him I was going a little over the speeding limit by accident."

"He tried to bribe a police officer with Tim Horton's coffee," Sören said.

"It didn't *quite* work." Maglor grinned. "Thankfully, he didn't decide to play cowboy and

arrest us, or I would have shot him." Maglor stopped grinning.

"I guaran-fucking-tee you there would have been an incident if I was driving," Ali said. "Probably moreso if it were the States."

"Oof, yeah." Sören scowled. "Jesus Christ, I'm sorry."

Ali shrugged. "I'm not going to say no to going by car, but we really *should* take two weeks instead of one, since we'll have at least two days' travel time each way."

"I wouldn't mind a road trip across the outback," Sören said. Then he made a *Mad Max* reference. "WITNESS ME!"

Maglor laughed, with an affectionate eyeroll; he patted Sören's head. "We don't need another hero."

"Oh *god.*" Kenny facepalmed.

"As you know, we shall have to look into hotel accommodations if we are traveling by car, and that's easier said than done with a dog," Dooku said. "Perhaps we could rent RVs for the occasion."

"Wow, now you really do sound like an old guy," Sören teased.

Dooku gave Sören a look; Sören batted his eyes innocently.

"That's not a terrible idea," Kenny said. "I'd rather go camping than stay in a hotel, myself."

"We'll still have to talk to my sister and Frankie about it," Sören said. "Margrét isn't fond of camping. Ari and I used to go camping in eastern Iceland during the winter when we were younger and she didn't want to come with us." Then Sören frowned, and Ali knew he was missing Ari.

Before Ali could go over and give him a hug, Dooku got up and took Sören's hand, pulling him up. "Here, sweetheart. Let's take the children out for a stroll."

"OK," Sören said.

Ali watched as Sören scooped up his son, and Dooku put Kate and Tori in the stroller. It was cute seeing them in "gay dads" mode, and Kenny put a hand on Ali's shoulder; Ali knew the Fingon part of Kenny was getting a little choked up about the Fingolfin part of Dooku. Ali leaned in and gave Kenny a little peck.

It's nice that he finally gets to see grandchildren. Kenny put his hand on Ali's belly.

Ali looked at the clock. It was almost time for Megadeth and Metallica's piano lesson. Her eyes met Maglor's, and then Huan started pawing at the glass doors, an indicator that he needed to go out. Maglor took Huan out, and Ali followed, while the kids helped their father load the dishwasher.

For a moment Maglor and Ali watched Huan sniff around the backyard in silence, then Maglor said, "I take it your prenatal appointment went well."

Ali nodded. "My due date is late February or early March. Mum or Da is probably going to

come out when it's time."

Maglor gave a nod, seeming to take it all in. Then he cocked his head to one side. "You didn't tell your father about... us, no?"

"Not yet." Ali put a hand on Maglor's arm, feeling a twinge of guilt. "It was difficult enough to tell him about how my path crossed with Sören and Margrét, with how careful I have to be on the phone. I thought it was better to handle that sort of information in-person. It'll be a bit weird, since you're also one of Sören's partners, but they're pretty live-and-let-live."

"OK. I *do* understand the necessity of keeping some information private to avoid awkwardness, but if your parents are Forceful they'll likely be able to tell even if we tried to hide it."

"Yeh. I think it won't really bother them that much. At least, that's what I'm hoping." Ali looked down at her belly and patted it. "Of course, they'll probably want to know whose it is, and what we're doing about that."

"I care more that the baby is healthy," Maglor said. "Whether it's biologically mine or biologically Kenny's, I'm prepared to treat the baby as both mine and his, and I'm sure Kenny feels the same way."

Ali nodded. "We had a talk about that on the way to the doctor's and he said the same thing."

"Although..." Maglor looked away, and over at Huan, who was doing his business. Maglor frowned a little.

Ali wondered if he was thinking about his son Ecthelion, and the brief hope of reunion being snatched away, with Ingwion declaring he'd sent Ecthelion to another universe to avoid being killed... and because Ingwion felt Maglor was "unworthy" of his son. Ali's nostrils flared at the memory of that day... and her heart ached for Maglor. Before she could put his arms around him, he turned back to her, trying to keep his expression neutral - trying to keep mentally shielded - but his brow was furrowed.

"What?" Ali asked.

Maglor exhaled sharply. "If the child is mine, have you thought about... how that's going to affect things?"

Ali realized she hadn't. Of course, she hadn't made the mistake of thinking of Maglor as human, since who and what he was had been revealed. But it was easy enough to forget about the possibility that the baby growing inside her had non-human DNA.

"If it's mine," Maglor went on, "they won't age like a normal human. They won't quite age on an Elven timeline either... but their childhood will be longer. Slower. They'll probably approach adulthood closer to thirty, than fifty, but that's still..."

"That's still going to make things complicated," Ali said. She needed to sit down. She used the Force to pull over a lawn chair. Her heart started pounding in her ears.

"It's far enough away for it to become very noticeable, that we still have time to make plans about... education, and what to tell people. But sooner than that..." Maglor also sat. "If it's mine, there's a distinct possibility that they'll be born with..." Maglor tucked his hair behind his ears, revealing the pointy tips. "My ears. That's going to make things *very*

interesting in a hospital. Best-case scenario, the doctors and nurses will think it's a birth defect. Worst-case scenario, it attracts the notice of the wrong people. MI6 might be able to help, but we're also supposed to be keeping a low profile and that's rather the opposite of keeping a low profile."

"Shit," Ali said.

Maglor raised an eyebrow. "Is there any way you could perhaps give birth at home? I'm sure Anthony could find a doula who's discrete..."

Ali pursed her lips. "Metallica and Megadeth were born by C-section and I was told later it would probably be better for any subsequent children of mine to also be born by C-section. So I was preparing for a planned C-section, which... you know, necessitates being in a hospital. But Anthony probably knows how to pull strings to get me the appropriate care that also... won't create a situation." Ali exhaled sharply. "We just have to talk to him." Their eyes met. "I mean, he knows you're not human, right?"

"MI6 knows I'm not human, but Anthony also doesn't know*what* I am, I haven't dropped my glamour around him. It's one thing for a government agency, and its agents, to know I'm something other than human. It's quite another thing for me to claim to be from a fictional species... and myself, a fictional character. And..." Maglor leaned back. Huan came over to him, tongue lolling, happy and carefree, as if Maglor and Ali weren't having a very serious conversation about how a half-Elven child would complicate their lives significantly. "That's the sort of information I'd prefer to disclose to Anthony as part of the bigger picture."

Ali's jaw dropped and a chill went through her. She'd sort of figured out Anthony was "one of them" back at Kenny's birthday in June, and she knew Maglor had as well, but this was the first they'd actually spoken of it. "You mean... what he is."

Maglor nodded. "It would be better to tell Anthony the truth about myself when he's ready to start exploring the truth about *himself*. I can't just go to him and say 'hi, I think you were my uncle Finarfin'."

"So that's..." Another chill went through Ali. It made too much sense. "I wonder if Sören knows."

"I think Sören knows *subconsciously*, but I think he's not letting himself poke at it too much while he and Anthony are playing the will-they-won't-they game." Maglor sighed and pinched the bridge of his nose.

"We could lock them in a room until they fuck," Ali half-joked.

Maglor laughed. Then he got serious again. "There's a right way and a wrong way to go about it, and just telling him what's what is the wrong way. He's the kind of guy who will demand proof, and dropping my glamour around him will help provide proof he needs... but it would be better if he showed signs that his memory is being jogged, so he's not feeling like my reveal is leading him or trying to manipulate him. It's a very delicate, tricky situation."

"Do you think showing him the palantir might help?"

"It might... but I'd prefer to save that as a last resort, again, it would be better if he was starting to get there on his own." Maglor shrugged. "I don't know how long that will take. I do know we have to have that conversation with him about the possibility that your child is

half-Elven and we should have a private birth just to be on the safe side, well before the baby gets here. He'll need time to make arrangements, especially if that means needing to leave the country temporarily to go to a private hospital somewhere. So if in a few months - say, after the Ceduna trip - we haven't had the Very Special Episode of Keeping Up With the Fëanorions -"

Ali snickered.

"I'll have to tell him regardless. But, hopefully, he'll get there beforehand, and me revealing myself will serve a twofold purpose - informing him the baby may require special protocol... and helping to confirm to him what he is... that all of this is real."

"Hopefully," Ali echoed, nodding.

Maglor took Ali's hand and squeezed. "Complicated or not... mine or not... I'm looking forward to the baby."

"Me too." Ali smiled and put her other hand on top of his. She knew that another son, or daughter, couldn't replace Ecthelion - children weren't interchangeable, she would be devastated if she lost one of hers. But she hoped nonetheless that it would be a balm for Maglor's soul, that it would ease at least a little of the pain of losing his son.

Maglor got up to clean up Huan's mess, and after he threw it in the trash can, Ali went to him and hugged him tight.

"I felt like everything was hopeless for so long," Maglor said. He kissed the top of her head. "But it's all coming together now. I *almost* feel like we can overturn the Doom."

Tears stung Ali's eyes, and she squeezed him. "Hold onto that feeling, love."

Maglor chuckled and started singing "*Don't stop believin'...*"

Sören pushed open the glass door just enough to stick his head out and sang, "*Streetlight, people...*"

Chapter 30

Sören and Frankie are sitting on a cliff leading out to the sea, under a bright blue sky, admiring their baby. Suddenly the sky grows dark and the air smells smoky, like something is on fire. A swarm of Balrogs surrounds them, and Frankie is thrown back. Before Sören can reach her, the Balrogs lash her with a dozen fiery whips and she goes up in flames, screaming.

Anthony takes the baby and shields the baby with his body. A Balrog comes towards him and just before Sören can Force throw the Balrog out of the way, Anthony is lashed by a whip.

Anthony lays bleeding out, losing color, dying. Sören is kneeling beside him, holding the agitated baby, trying to give Anthony some sort of last comfort. Sören leans in and touches his face. *Don't go*.

"I love you," Anthony says, reaching up to cover Sören's hand with his. He closes his eyes for the last time...

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Sören woke up with a scream and a start, heart pounding. For a moment he just sat, breathing hard, shaking.

He'd had this dream before, and tried to chalk it up to worrying about Frankie dying in childbirth. Now that Frankie had survived the birth - albeit it was a difficult one, requiring an emergency C-section - Sören thought the dream would go away. And of course, it was back. And once again, felt like so much more than a dream.

Sören looked at the clock. It was forty-five minutes before his alarm was set to go off. After his Krav practice and run he'd tended to the children then took a nap - Frankie was coming over to visit him and the baby. Sören didn't really feel rested, but he wasn't about to call Frankie and cancel their plans. He got up and walked to the kitchen, hoping that as he made coffee and went about his business, he'd get his mind off the dream.

It was August sixteenth - almost a month after Frankie's C-section. She wasn't fully healed yet but she was doing better. Well enough to feel restless, well enough to go for a car ride across town to Sören's place. Even so, Sören couldn't help wincing as he watched Frankie get out of Margrét's car, and rushed over to put an arm around her waist and help her into the house. While Margrét had also been invited to visit, she'd suggested that Sören and Frankie spend some time together by themselves, and she'd use the time to run errands.

Kate and Tori were playing in their playpen, and little Søren was in a bassinet. Frankie's face lit up at the sight of him and she pulled away from Sören's arm and marched right over to the bassinet, though she grimaced a little as she got closer to the bassinet, like she had moved too fast and had overdone it.

"Easy," Sören said. He picked up the baby out of the bassinet and sat on the couch, with

Frankie beside him. He handed her the baby and felt himself grinning like an idiot as she held the baby, smiling. She pet the baby's hair and stroked his face, rained kisses over his face, and booped his nose.

"He's so beautiful," Frankie said, her voice soft.

Sören reached out to pat her shoulder, and tousled her hair. "We made that." He turned Frankie's face to his and kissed the tip of her nose. "You're beautiful."

Frankie laughed and rested the baby on her lap, to give Sören a little squeeze. Then she was fussing over the baby again, who gurgled. "Hard to believe he's almost a month old now."

Sören nodded - it both felt like Frankie had given birth just yesterday, and like he'd been taking care of the baby for years. He realized some of the time distortion was because of the familiarity - he and his partners and cousin were pretty convinced little Søren was Curufin reborn. It also felt surreal, even though he'd gotten far more advance notice of Frankie's pregnancy than he had of the necessity of taking custody of Dag's daughters.

"I hope he hasn't been too much trouble," Frankie said.

"Not really." That was a half-truth; the reason why Sören had needed a nap after Krav and his run was because he'd been up most of the night, this time not working on art but because the baby kept waking him up. But he didn't want Frankie to feel guilty about giving him full custody, especially when the birth had been so difficult. And even though the baby was prone to waking him up, Sören still didn't regret having him... especially moments like this, when he looked at the cute little face, the tiny perfect fingers and toes, and his heart just melted.

Frankie snickered. "You look like hell."

"I had a nap before you came over. I didn't sleep well." Sören shrugged. "Do you want anything to eat or drink? I made a fresh pitcher of strawberry lemonade."

"That sounds lovely, ta." Before Sören could get up, Frankie put an arm out to restrain him. She handed the baby back to him and she got up. Sören made a noise of protest and Frankie said, "It's been almost a month since the C-section. I'm healing up. My doctor says it's good for me to get moving, walk around a bit." Frankie scowled. "I don't like everybody waiting on me hand and foot."

Sören sighed and gave a resigned little nod. He knew better than to get in Frankie's way. Even so, he watched her carefully as she walked to the kitchen. Frankie poured them each a glass of lemonade and carried it over, using the Force to pass Sören's glass to him. Keeping one hand on the baby, Sören grabbed his glass and drank. "*Takk.*"

They decided to cuddle together and watch a movie - they picked out*Finding Nemo* "for the kids", but Kate and Tori weren't yet two and too young to really understand the movie; Sören knew it was an excuse to watch a kids' movie. Not that Sören needed an excuse to indulge his inner child.

Though Sören liked the movie - one of those movies that never got old no matter how many times he'd seen it - he kept stealing glances at the baby, as if he didn't want to miss a single moment of his child's life. He felt ridiculous for how much he was looking at the baby, especially when he was still the same as he was five minutes ago, but Sören couldn't get over the wonder and awe he felt at the tiny little miracle he'd helped create.

Frankie, too, looked frequently at the baby, and from time to time they'd both look at the baby and then at each other, exchanging loving smiles, rubbing noses. Sören knew it would be at least another few weeks before Frankie was cleared to have sex, so he held back on kissing her, not wanting to get too worked up, but finally they couldn't help themselves and after rubbing noses again, their lips met, and what was supposed to be a soft, sweet little kiss deepened, their tongues playing together, sensually swirling.

Before they could kiss again, Huan let out a whine and started pawing at the door.

"Ah, shit, he needs to go out," Sören said. "Should I pause this till I get back, or do you want to keep watching it?"

"Can I come out with you?" Frankie asked. "I know we'd have to get the kids ready, but after being laid up for what felt like forever, I'd like to get out and get some fresh air and sunlight."

Sören once again worried about Frankie overdoing it, and when she saw him hesitate, she glowered. Sören flashed her a nervous little smile - he didn't want to annoy her or make her feel patronized - and nodded. He got Kate and Tori into their stroller, and then he put on the baby sling and put Søren in it. Pushing the stroller with one hand, holding Huan's leash in the other, Sören followed Frankie outside, not able to help chuckling that Frankie held the door open for him. "*Takk*."

"And they say chivalry is dead," Frankie said with a smirk.

Sören leaned in and kissed the tip of her nose. She got up on her tiptoes and gave him a noogie, then winced a little as she sank back on her feet.

"Are you *sure* you're up for the walk?" Sören asked.

Frankie glared again. "I'm not up for the walk." Frankie grinned. "I'm Frankie."

"Hi Not Up For The Walk I'm Frankie, I'm Sören."

"Piss off."

Sören snickered. Frankie playfully elbowed him.

It was a beautiful day - winter in Sydney never got too cold, and in mid-August it was feeling a little like spring. Huan gave a slow trot, reining in his excitement to be outside as if he knew to keep the pace more moderate for Frankie's sake. Sören tried not to fret too much, wanting to believe Frankie at her word that she was fine and this was physician-approved activity, but his mind's eye started replaying the nightmare of her going up in flames again, and when he saw her wincing a little his heart started beating faster. *Oh no. I hope this isn't going to cause post-surgery complications.*

Sören slowed down a little without saying anything, and Huan slowed too. The slower pace allowed them to take more time to look around at the picturesque neighborhood with its trees, under the bright blue sky. Sören continued to look at his son, and then little Søren flashed a smile and Sören gasped. Sören knew that this was probably just passing gas or a random occurrence - he'd read up on child development and learned babies didn't start socially smiling until six weeks or so, and his son wasn't six weeks yet - but nonetheless he was delighted.

"Look, Frankie, he's smiling."

Frankie gasped too, and her face lit up. "Oh my*god*." She chucked the baby's chin and started cooing, "Did you just fart? Didja? Didja?" Frankie booped the baby's nose. "That's it. Fart in the Valar's general direction, that's a good lad."

Sören threw his head back and laughed, even more delighted. "I fucking love you, you know."

"I love you too." Frankie laughed too.

They continued walking, and then Frankie stopped and grimaced. Sören immediately stopped in his tracks, and heeled the dog. "You OK?"

"Yeah, I'm fine. Probably laughed a little too hard, is all." Frankie gave him a shove. "Keep going, Huan has to shit."

Sören snickered again. A moment later Huan began to sniff the ground and then he paused, a signal that he wanted to do his business there. They waited while Huan eliminated, and then Sören remembered something he forgot in his rush to get the kids ready, and facepalmed. "Shit."

"What?" Frankie's eyebrows went up.

"The scoop and the little bags. One of the neighbors is going to complain if they're out walking and they find dog shit."

Frankie immediately began walking off in the direction of the house. "I'll get it."

"Wait -" Sören didn't like the idea of her taking the extra trip when she was still healing up.

Frankie shot him a stern look over her shoulder. "You stay here with the kids."*You know Krav Maga and shit, I don't. Not that I think anything would happen here, but...*

Sören frowned and folded his arms, but didn't go after her to stop her.

Then Frankie called out, "Oh, where do you keep all of that?"

"Drawer underneath the kitchen counter. You know, I could get it -"

Frankie flipped the bird over her shoulder and continued walking.

Sören continued waiting while Huan did his thing, and then Huan came back over, smiling and tongue lolling, looking happy to be relieved. Sören stooped down to give the dog some pets and chuckled as Huan licked his face. When he rose and the baby made noises, Sören felt a twinge of apprehension about Frankie going to the house and back, and tapped his foot.

"Birb," Kate yelled, and pointed.

There was a raven flying overhead. Sören felt another twinge of apprehension, intensifying when the raven alighted on a branch and gave them a curious look. He didn't see ravens often in Sydney, and every Icelandic schoolchild knew Odin had two of them, Huginn and Muninn, or Thought and Memory. Sören put a hand on his hip, staring back at the raven, but he felt no malice from the raven, and Sören wondered if it was one of Odin's or he was just being paranoid.

"Hi," Tori said, waving to the bird. "Hi hi hi."

"Hello, princess," the raven croaked, raising a wing in greeting, and then it turned its head to Sören and said, "Hello, Fëanáro." Then it took off, flying away.

What in the fuck. A chill went down Sören's spine. That was *definitely* one of Odin's ravens, and yet it was friendly; Sören didn't sense any sort of evil from the bird. Sören wondered if it wasn't just Freyr and Loki who weren't really on Odin's side, but if maybe Odin's ravens were at least more neutral.

Neutral, friendly, or not, whatever they can see, he can see.

Sören's hackles were up now, heart beating faster. The sight of Frankie returning with the scoop and a bag, seemingly fine as she walked over, didn't really help to calm them. Sören got to work cleaning up Huan's poop from the ground, and when he was finished he tried to keep his tone nonchalant as he said, "Ready to head back?"

"I was just *in* your house. A few more minutes, please?"

Sören gave a nod and they resumed walking. Sören searched the sky to see if the raven would come back, but no sign. Sören wondered if he'd hallucinated everything, but then he spotted a single black feather in the grass and Frankie noticed it too, squatting down. "That's a nice feather," she said.

"You missed the raven sighting." Sören frowned. "It talked to us."

"What?" Frankie stood up, and then she winced - Sören could feel it across their Force bond, though filtered, that she'd stood up too fast, and transitioning from squatting to standing and vice versa was still a bit much for her right now.

"Yeah." Sören huffed. "I... think it was one of Odin's."

"I mean, if those fucks went back to Asgard, he knows where you live, they've been in your house." Frankie was frowning now too. "Still, wonder why he's spying. I hope he isn't planning on pulling any bullshit soon."

"Me either." Sören's mind's eye once again started replaying the nightmare he'd had about the Balrog ambush, Frankie going up in flames. Odin, as far as he knew, had nothing to do with Balrogs, that was Sauron and Morgoth's domain - though Loki had claimed to be originally an Elf, then captured by Morgoth and changed into a Balrog, and Odin had found him and healed him. Sören had never asked how their paths had crossed in the first place, and now he regretted not asking, of course he knew he might not have gotten a straight answer. But the connection still made him uneasy - he had initially thought it was his subconscious expressing fears about Frankie dying in childbirth, now he was wondering if it was his Force senses trying to warn him about post-childbirth complications... something that Odin might be manipulating from afar, such as with rune magic.

Sören's fists and teeth clenched, and then he caught himself and took a few deep breaths, not wanting his mood to agitate the children. Huan stopped again, this time just to pee, and when he was done, Frankie said, "We can head back now."

As they walked back towards the house, Frankie took Sören's hand and squeezed, seeming to know the raven made him uneasy. Sören tried to stay calm, but his thoughts

of Frankie going up in flames in the nightmare once again intersected with the memory of finding his mother dead... and then finding out decades later it hadn't been a natural brain aneurysm but the end of a battle with Odin. He tried to make himself think happy thoughts - looking at the baby, looking at the dog. He glanced over at Frankie, and she winced again.

Sören stopped. "Are you OK?"

"A little cramp. I'll be fine."

Sören shook his head. "I can carry you back if you -"

Frankie turned to him and narrowed her eyes. "Sören, stop. Just... stop. I told you I'm fine to walk to the bloody house."

They made it, and Frankie sat down once they were back inside. Tori started squalling, and when Sören picked her up out of her stroller to soothe her, he noticed she felt a little heavier which meant she had a wet diaper. "I need to change her."

Sören went down to the nursery, carrying Tori, with little Søren still on the sling. Sören put his son in the crib for a moment and set to work changing Tori. He had expected Frankie to sit in the living room with Kate and take a rest after the cramp, but as he was partway through cleaning Tori, Frankie showed up in the nursery carrying Kate. Sören opened his mouth, about to protest, and Frankie said, "She needs changing too."

Frankie set Kate down on the changing station next to her sister, and began taking off Kate's diaper.

"What are you doing?" Sören asked.

"Ballroom dancing." Frankie gave him a look. "What does it bloody look like I'm doing?"

"Uh, changing a diaper, but, I mean, I can do it. You should sit down -"

Frankie let out a long, drawn-out sigh and stopped what she was doing. For a brief instant Sören thought Frankie was actually going to listen to him and then she resumed changing Kate's diaper. Since both girls needed to be changed, Sören couldn't complain too much, and just set about powdering Tori before he put on a fresh diaper. Once Tori and Kate were both changed, there was a long pause. Sören didn't need Force empathy to know Frankie was annoyed with him, and he felt sheepish since she was obviously standing upright and not keeling over, but he still worried about her and he wished that didn't irritate her so much.

"OK, Sören, look." Frankie turned around to face him, and folded her arms. "I'm gonna start this off by telling you I love you, I've loved you for a long time now, and one of the things I love most about you is that you're caring and sensitive." She took Sören's hands for a minute, and Sören tried to smile. "Canon might have painted you as an uncaring asshole who just did whatever the fuck he wanted, but that wasn't the real you."

*Not until the end, when almost everyone left and I had no more fucks to give*Sören swallowed hard. "*Takk.*"

Frankie let go of his hands, looked away, looked down, and there was a long moment where she put her face in her hands. Before he could reach out to her, she took her hands away and Sören saw she was on the verge of tears. "I think," Frankie said, her

voice shaking, "we need a break from each other for our mental health."

"...What?" Sören's jaw dropped, completely shocked.

"I know you want me to be involved in our baby's life, and, like, I'm not trying to abandon him... or you. But..." Frankie shook her head, the tears brimming over. "I. Can't. Keep. Coming. Here. And having you freak out about whether or not I'm OK every five minutes - "

"It's just while you're healing up after major surgery -"

"Yeah, and it's already been close to a month. You and I both know when I'm at six weeks, eight weeks, you're still going to be paranoid."

"I won't be like that forever -"

"Hence why I said a break, not permanently. Just a few weeks, maybe a couple months."

But Sören heard the unvoiced *Will you? You'll find something else to worry about after my doctor says I'm fully recovered.* And Sören felt himself bristling at that, but he knew, also, she was right. He remembered what it was like to live with Maglor in Iceland from 2009 to March 2014, the way Maglor showed concern at every little cough and sneeze, every minor injury, like Sören was made of glass. At the time, not knowing who Maglor really was, what Maglor was, Sören had found it endearing, thinking "Alejandro" was a really caring, nurturing guy. And that was true to a point. Yet, "Alejandro" had left after Sören had walking pneumonia, a complication from having bronchitis with his asthma, and Sören had found out years later it was because Maglor was reminded of Sören's mortality and the fact that he was going to die someday. Now, of course, Sören had the constitution and lifespan of an Elf - he could still die, but not from a human illness - and Sören better understood what Maglor must have been thinking and feeling during that time. It was why Sören hadn't crossed that line with Anthony, as badly as he and Anthony wanted each other - Sören could barely deal with being involved with Frankie, as mortal as she was. He hated that Frankie was right, that when the risk of post-surgery injury and complications was completely done, Sören would be worrying about other things.

And he knew, then, that they were finished. This wasn't a break for a few weeks or a couple months till Sören "calmed down", because Sören would never calm down. For the rest of Frankie's life, he was going to worry about her and dread the end, *especially* with the nightmares he'd been having, since he knew from past experience his dreams weren't always dreams, he'd been dreaming of a past life, Fëanor's life, before the reveal. It was going to be hard enough to have her in his life as a friend, as a family member, and still care about her from a distance, and watch the inevitable decline, or worse, some sort of tragic catastrophe. It was downright unbearable to be this attached, romantically, and know things were heading there. And Sören thought it was better to accept that now, than try to hold on and this break be even harder months, years from now, as they continued bonding.

Frankie seemed to know it too. She looked away again, as if to try to hide her tears, though she couldn't. Sören tried to keep his own tears in check - not because he had hangups about crying not being "manly", but because he didn't want to further upset her. He knew it was hard enough for her to get to this point.

Sören swallowed and gave a small nod. "I understand."

"Yeah." Frankie looked down at her shoes, then back up at Sören. She sniffed and wiped

her eyes. "I'm, ah... I'm gonna call Margrét and tell her I'm ready to go."

"OK." Sören reached out with the intent to pat her shoulder, but quickly retracted his hand, feeling like even that little bit of touch was a bad idea right now. Sören rocked back on his heels. "Will I be seeing you at Sunday dinner like usual?"

"Probably not. Not for awhile. When I say I need a break, I mean it's probably better that we make it a clean break for a few weeks or months." Frankie bit her lower lip. "To be honest, I probably won't see you again before the trip to your uncle's place."

"But you're still planning on coming along for that?" Sören would feel worse if they didn't.

"Margrét should reunite her uncle, she wouldn't want to leave me home alone for a week or two, so I don't want to stand in her way. And a break isn't, like, avoiding you forever. If nothing else, I want to see how the kid is doing."

Sören tried to muster a smile, but he knew it was a very fake smile, and he knew Frankie could tell. They brought the kids out to the living room and Frankie called Margrét and they waited in awkward silence.

Sören expected to fall apart when Frankie left, but instead he just sat for awhile, numb, watching Kate and Tori play together, watching the baby sleep. He knew this was for the best, but even with that knowledge, and her not being one of his main partners, it still *hurt*, feeling like a piece of his heart had been ripped out and smashed to pieces. He wondered if this was how Maglor felt when he left human companions before he could watch them die, and felt bad that he'd ever judged Maglor for that.

They had each other, and Dooku, but three still felt like such a lonely number for eternity.

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The next day Sören had his Tuesday shooting practice with Anthony, followed by their usual run. Though Sören kept telling himself the break with Frankie - which was more in truth a de facto breakup - was for the best, he nonetheless felt on edge in a way that the shooting practice and the exertion of the run didn't help. He knew some of that was the raven sighting - he kept looking at the sky during their run, expecting to see the raven again, wondering if the time had come for things to escalate with Odin, before he was ready.

And some of that, a lot of that, was because of his attraction to Anthony, which wasn't going away, and yesterday had reinforced for him why a relationship with a mortal was a bad idea. Yet the heart wanted what it wanted - and Sören's cock wanted, too - and being around Anthony felt like adding insult to injury.

After their run, Anthony took him to a cafe, which was pretty typical especially on Tuesdays - despite a couple months of gun practice Sören still wasn't completely comfortable with guns and didn't know that he ever would be, and Anthony seemed to intuitively know Sören needed a "carrot-and-stick" approach, so getting a drink or a treat at the cafe was a sort of reward. Even having the peach mint lemonade slushie that Sören had come to love from this place, didn't help. Because Anthony was right there, sweaty and delicious; Sören wanted to suck on him instead of the straw.

Sören frowned, slurping at his drink so fiercely he gave himself a brain freeze. "Oh,*fuck.*"

"You OK?" Anthony raised an eyebrow.

Sören nodded, wincing. *Immortality may keep me from the common cold, but it sure as fuck doesn't prevent a brain freeze.*

Anthony threw his head back and laughed aloud at that, then quickly caught himself since they were in public and Sören hadn't spoken those words aloud so the laughter would seem odd out of context. Anthony gave a small clear of his throat. "My sympathies," Anthony said, and leaned across the table and patted him, with a look on his face that suggested he wasn't completely sympathetic.

It *really* didn't help when Anthony laughed, which lit up his face, making him even more handsome. Sören tried fiercely to shield himself - he knew Anthony knew about the attraction, but Sören didn't want to increase the sexual tension between them even more, it was already at breaking point. Sören couldn't stop thinking about what Anthony would look like with his shirt off, glistening with sweat. He hadn't seen Anthony shirtless before, but he could practically see it from the way Anthony's clothes fit him, the lean, wiry, sculpted body of a soldier. Sören was starting to get hard, and of course, Anthony was eating *a fucking popsicle* and Sören could picture what Anthony's lips looked like wrapped around a cock. Sören had a feeling Anthony was doing that on purpose to be a cocktease and *try* to escalate things.

Damn you, Anthony Hewlett-Johnson. Damn you to the Hells.

Then Anthony stopped sucking on his popsicle and gave Sören a serious look. "Are you OK besides the brain freeze? You've seemed... surlier than usual, all day."

Sören put his drink down. He knew it was pointless to lie. "No, I'm not OK."

"What's going on?" Anthony resumed sucking the popsicle.

Sören exhaled sharply. "I'll wait till you're... done with that. It's a bit distracting."

Anthony took the popsicle out of his mouth, gave Sören a little smirk, and then quickly finished his popsicle. When he was done he leaned back in his chair with his drink and gave Sören the "go ahead" gesture.

Sören looked down. He didn't really want to have this conversation, especially not in a public place, hoping he wouldn't start crying. "So yesterday, Frankie told me we should take a break for our mutual mental health. She says I'm worrying about her too much. She's not wrong, and... the writing on the wall here is we're probably through, permanently, because I'm... never going to stop worrying." Sören glanced around the cafe, looking for any signs of eavesdropping. "I'm always constantly reminded of... how frail she is, compared to me, after the change." He was careful with how he worded his immortality, with others present, whether anyone was listening in or not. "I'm not indestructible, but I'm a lot more so than she is, and every little thing is reinforcing that chasm between us, and it's only going to get worse with time."

"I see," Anthony said.

Sören thought he rather did, since that could be applied to Anthony as well. "Yeah." Sören sighed and looked out the window at the ocean. "It fucking sucks."

Anthony seemed like he either didn't know what to say in response or he was considering

his response very, very carefully. There was a silence as they finished their drinks, and Sören noticed Anthony's shielding was a bit tighter than usual, making Sören wonder if he'd hit a nerve with Anthony and the problem of their feelings for each other. Anthony finally broke the silence as he rose from the table and said softly, "Come on, I'll drive you home."

They were still quiet as they got in the Audi, and as Anthony pulled out of the parking lot and onto the road. Sören stared out the window, watching the coast and then the trees. At last, Anthony glanced over at Sören, then back at the road, took a deep breath, and said, "Sören."

"Jæja."

"This is probably none of my business, but I know you love Frankie a lot, and it's... it's painful to me to watch you push away someone you care about because you're obsessing over losing them."

I bet. Sören kept that reply to himself.

Anthony went on, "I realize that the difference between an immortal and a non-immortal is... non-trivial, and I'm not going to presume to tell you how to feel about that. But it seems to me that what would be a normal amount of concern and discomfort over your lifespan and health versus hers, has blown up because... you've been feeling a lack of control, a sense of powerlessness, since your brother was taken last year."

"That's one way of putting it." Sören nodded. "And not just from that, but the Dag -" Sören stopped himself from saying "Dagor Dagorath" just in time, not wanting to explain "the Tolkien thing" to Anthony right now. Sören swallowed and said, "That disturbance we all felt back in October. That's when it started; what happened with my brother exacerbated it."

Anthony raised an eyebrow. "You know more about what happened than you're telling me."

"It's... a lot. More than you can handle."

"Try me."

*I'd like to try you, all right. Every position possible.*Sören pushed his mind out of the gutter and shook his head firmly. "Not today. There's too much and there's some context missing that I'd rather not have to get into at this time."

"You *will* tell me at some point. I'll let you off the hook today because I know you're not in a great place, but whatever happened..." Anthony exhaled. "I can't help you if I don't know what's going on with you."

"You can't help with this."

"You'd be surprised with what I can and can't do."

Sören pinched the bridge of his nose.*I don't think you can fight a god.*"Anyway, powerlessness... you're onto something there. I'd probably still be twitchy about Frankie's mortality but I don't know if I'd be freaking out at every little cramp or twinge she has if what happened last year, hadn't happened."

"You need to take back a sense of control. I know that you've gotten some of that back through Krav and learning how to use a gun, but it's not all there. There's another piece of the puzzle that I've been wanting to address with you for awhile, and didn't know how to go about saying it without sounding like a dick, but now since you brought it up... you said in October, when The Thing You Don't Want To Tell Me About happened, you got into a car accident and you haven't driven since then."

"Correct."

"I think you should try to start driving again."

Sören glared. "I did try, which is why I know I can't do it. I had a panic attack -"

"Have you tried recently? It's August now, ten months since October. Time doesn't heal all wounds, but you might be distant enough from what happened to not have such a visceral response behind the wheel. And I'd be there, trying to help keep you calm, and be encouraging. I..."

Sören started shaking his head. He remembered how awful the panic attack was the last time he tried to drive, and the intense self-loathing for days, weeks afterwards, the deeper descent down the spiral of grief and terror. It had, in fact, been almost a year since the Dagorath, but it was still an open wound that bled from time to time, and he felt like attempting to drive and failing again would just rip that wound even bigger, make him feel even more powerless and useless in the fight against their enemies.

"Sören, I hate to sound like a broken record, but I'm going to tell you the same thing I told you about learning to use a gun. If you won't do it for yourself, do it for the sake of your children. Consider that there might come a time when you're in a situation where you *have* to drive to save your life and theirs. Consider -"

Sören put up his hand. He already felt enough like a failure and a weakling for not being able to drive due to his anxiety, and while he knew Anthony was trying to help, it was just making him feel worse. "No."

Anthony sighed. He continued driving, in silence. Sören thought he dropped it, and then a couple of minutes later Anthony said, "What if we start small? Just around a parking lot -"

"I. Told. You. No." Sören faced him, scowling. He didn't want to be angry with Anthony, but it was the perfect storm - the wrong suggestion at absolutely the wrong time. If Anthony had made this suggestion any other time it still would have been unwelcome, but especially now. Sören felt his temper rising, and even as he tried to stuff it down and think before he opened his mouth, the words came out of him, a flood of fire, his anger at himself - especially for the ways the gift of immortality had turned out to be a curse - now directed at Anthony. "You know, you have some fucking nerve. You're an MI6 agent, you were Special Boat Service. You're not, as far as I know, a psychologist or a life coach. But you're trying to act like one, and you're out of your fucking league because you think that me driving again is going to fix my fucking problems with Frankie, and you just don't get it. It doesn't matter whether I drive or not, or jump from a plane in a parachute, or learn to fly a fucking plane, that little bit of control I take back *isn't going to make Frankie immortal* It isn't going to make it hurt less when she gets sick, when she dies, and I'm still here -"

"I didn't say that it would fix things, or make any of that painless -"

"You didn't say it explicitly, but in the context of telling me I'm pushing her away because I feel powerless, and this is a way to take back my power... you sound like one of those

fucking New Age self-help gurus. I realize your assignment is to help us keep out of trouble, and protect us, and you're trying to teach me to protect myself but you're... you're crossing a line here. I am not your fucking improvement project -"

"No, you're not, and I didn't say you were, and I don't think of you that way -"

"-and you don't get how phobias work if you think I can just instantly overcome my panic with driving because you're there. You're also overestimating your effect on me, like you... like you think you're my dom." There it was. Sören knew as he spoke those words that Anthony did, in fact, have an effect on him - he felt safe with Anthony and it wasn't just because Anthony was a trained killer... and he was trying to repudiate it, and, especially, the not-so-secret craving he had for Anthony to dominate him sexually. "You're crossing a line," Sören repeated, but he knew the line that had been crossed was their feelings for each other - the way Sören ached for him more and more, and it was getting unbearable. "And maybe, just like it seems like the right thing for Frankie and I to take a break, you and I should *also* take a break for awhile and give each other some space."

"That rather complicates things with your Krav lessons and your marksmanship lessons."

Sören shrugged. "A few days or weeks, then, not permanently. But I... I can't deal with this right now. I need you to stop trying to *help* so fucking much. You're not helping now. You're being the opposite of helpful."

Anthony gave Sören a wounded look, and Sören knew he'd probably laid it on too thick. Then Anthony got reactive, and gritted out, "Excuse me for giving a damn about you."

That did it. Something about that reply pressed a button and Sören snarled, "If you actually gave a damn about me you'd know when to back off, when to stop helping, you'd know some things can't be fixed." *Just give up on me. Forget about me. There is no hope for us.*

Anthony huffed. "You're right, I think we probably do need space from each other for a bit."

"Good." *Fuck you, Anthony.*

—

Sören couldn't sleep that night. After lying awake for an hour, he stole out to the forge, knowing Maglor or Dooku would tend to the kids if they needed anything.

Sören hadn't been to the forge since his son was born - he hadn't had a lot of time or energy - but, remembering the visit from one of Odin's ravens, he knew he needed to get in gear to make a sword of his own so he could resume fencing with Dooku and Maglor, he'd been long out of practice. The seax knife he'd made for Anthony was a good stepping stone to making a sword, or at least the prototype or a "first draft" sword.

Unfortunately, being in the forge reminded Sören of the knife he made for Anthony, and the break they were taking. It hurt to be around him, but it hurt to be separated from him even more. Sören's mood darkened as he remembered the days when he was Fëanor, retreating into his forge as he felt more and more rejected by Nerdanel, which also ripped open the wound of being rejected by Finwë, never good enough. Creation wasn't just Fëanor's obsession, it was his escape. If others thought Fëanor was too sensitive, too

needy, he would just be alone, not needing anyone, not burdening others with his feelings, channeling all of that emotional intensity and passion into his work. Sören felt like old patterns were repeating in new ways, that this was the beginning of others thinking he was "a lot" and withdrawing from him, one way or another. Eternity was no good if you had to spend it alone, and Sören wondered if he was on his way there.

So Sören threw himself into his work, making himself forget about his troubles, immersing himself in the finished product coming to life in his mind's eye, and all of the little steps it would take to get there. As he cut the bar of steel, it was amazing to him to both rediscover the wonder of working steel, fresh and new again, and yet have it be familiar, knowing intuitively what to do. When he'd painted it was easy to lose himself for hours in the vision manifesting itself on the canvas, as if he were bringing a world to life and drawn into it, and it was much the same with smithing, except instead of a little world or some deeper reality, he was bringing an object to life... a sort of birthing process. He wasn't just shaping its form, its material presence, but it felt like he was enchanting it, quickening it to serve a specific purpose.

As Sören put the bar of steel in the fire and looked into the flames, he thought about Maglor's sword, that Fëanor had made long ago... the engraving of "Come and get it" in Quenya, in the Tengwar script, on the blade. For years, Sören signed his pottery and canvases with a bindrune made of the Norse futhark runes. In his mind's eye he saw himself as Fëanor creating the Tengwar script, writing in it... and then he saw himself getting the idea for the script, wanting to teach Maedhros how to read and write, and deciding to go meditate in a tree... but not just any tree. He saw himself taking a trip to Telperion and Laurelin themselves and camping in a hammock between them, bathing in their light, stirring the Flame Imperishable inside him.

His heart beat faster as he thought of the myth of Odin hanging himself on the World Tree, taking up the runes.

I know that I hung on a windy tree
nine long nights,
wounded with a spear, dedicated to Odin,
sacrificed myself to myself,
on that tree of which no man knows from where its roots run

None gave me bread,
none gave me drink.
I looked down;
with a loud cry
I took up runes;
from that tree I fell.

Sören's jaw dropped and his mouth went dry, his hair standing on end.*That motherfucker stole the runes from me.*

He remembered Finarfin's bird sanctuary at Alqualondë... the swans, the ducks and geese... a nest with two ravens that Finarfin himself had trained as messengers. *And those were Finarfin's goddamn birds first.*

Sören wanted to scream. This lent a whole new dynamic to why Odin was afraid of Fëanor-Fenrir. It wasn't simply that the Valar had thrown Miriel to Odin and Sören was coming to avenge his mother. Odin had stolen from them. When Odin had taken up the runes, he had stolen a piece of the Flame Imperishable; Sören thought of the first rune in the futhark, Fehu. Something about Odin taking up the runes - stealing that power - had

given him a foothold in this world, and stealing Finarfin's ravens had reinforced it. It was, to Sören's way of thinking, on par with stealing the Silmarils.

Well, I'm coming to take back what's mine, you dirty bastard. Sören glared into the fire.

Hammering the sword after it had been heated took a long time, and it was strenuous - Sören's neck and shoulders and upper arms ached, and he knew he'd be feeling it even more if he was still mortal - but he was also determined, and as much as it hurt it also *felt good*, pounding the metal like he was pounding in Odin's face.

All sense of time seemed to stop; Sören saw the dawn rising through the forge windows as he took the hammered metal and heated it again, to start the annealing process. It would take at least a day to cool the sword, before he could work on it again, with more precision. Maglor came in as Sören was heating the metal in the forge, and Maglor stopped in his tracks, looking stunned - looking as if he'd seen a god.

Sören took a hand away from what he was doing for a few seconds to wave, and then looked back at the metal in the fire.

"I came to see how you were doing," Maglor said, his tone hushed, reverent.

Sören could feel Maglor's lust across their Force bond - Maglor was reining in the desire to go over to Sören, grab him, and bend him over the anvil. Sören's own cock stirred, but he made himself hold back, needing to get the cooling process started before he could act on desire, and he wasn't there yet. Sören also knew that for all his lusting, Maglor wasn't going to let him evade the question; there was also concern broadcast.

Sören made a noise, not really able to articulate his feelings in words.

"You were very quiet last night, and... you spent all night in the forge, so I had a feeling something was wrong," Maglor said. He sat down and watched Sören continue to heat the metal. "You want to talk about it?"

Sören shrugged. "Frankie and I are taking a break. And now... Anthony and I are taking a break too."

"Oh? Did you... and Anthony... have a fight?"

Sören didn't answer that right away. He didn't want the fire to start acting up - it felt hotter, and Sören had already seen what his temper could do. Maglor seemed to understand Sören holding his peace while he was at the fire - Maglor had been through this before, with Fëanor's upsets, though Fëanor tried to not put Maglor in the middle of the difficulties he had with Maglor's mother. When the sword was ready to go in the insulator, Sören watched it for a moment, the metal red-hot, glowing and seething like the wounds inside his soul.

Sören sat down. He and Maglor just looked at each other for a long moment, and then Sören said, "Anthony thinks I should try driving again. He thinks I might be in a position someday where I have to drive to save my life or the kids' lives."

"He's not wrong," Maglor said.

Damn it, this is like you taking your uncles' side when we used to squabble. Sören's fists clenched - he really didn't like that this reminded him of that, that the disagreement with Anthony didn't just hit a nerve but it hit too close to home, was a little too familiar. A frisson

went down Sören's spine and he continued, "You were there when I freaked out and couldn't drive. You know that I *can't.*"

"I think," Maglor said, "you should try at least one more time before saying for certain that you can't."

Sören scowled.

Maglor narrowed his eyes. "I'm not trying to be an asshole, Ada. I don't think any less of you for not driving, for having anxiety about it, and I'm sure Anthony doesn't either. But this is like your discomfort with guns. We have to do what we have to do to survive."

"I feel like a fucking failure," Sören said. "The worst part about the Dagor Dagorath, feeling it wherever the fuck it was? It wasn't just the death of everyone that version of Fëanor ever loved. It was knowing he was like a god and there was not a damn thing he could do to save the people he loved. That in the end, the only way to destroy Morgoth was to destroy *everything*. And that was with Fëanor at full strength. I'm not there yet. I'm closer than I was, but I may not ever get there. It feels like everything is hopeless bullshit."

"I am acquainted with losing everyone I love, and I used to feel the same way myself. Key word being 'used to'. I'm not going to give you any platitudes. But I think that you need to try to keep fighting. Even if there is no way to undo the Doom, we need to at least try to give the Valar and Odin and whoever else, absolute hell. We need to make sure putting us through this misery for eons turns out to not be worth it to them. You driving again, or at least being ready to drive in a life-or-death emergency, isn't going to undo the Doom itself. But it's one more piece of power reclaimed, and that's how we get there, is baby steps."

"Like I said... I don't think I can do it."

"Can you at least try?"

Sören shook his head and closed his eyes, holding back the tears, remembering the awful anguish of the panic attack behind the wheel of the jeep. The crushing feeling of defeat.

Now there was a new defeat - the spat with Anthony. Anthony trying so hard to *help*, because he gave a damn... because it was a sort of pseudo-relationship, the closest they could get to intimacy without crossing that line. "He meddles so goddamn much," Sören said through clenched teeth. He swallowed hard and his voice shook as he went on, "He doesn't run my life. He acts like he fucking owns me." *Because he does.*

Maglor's eyes locked with his, silver mirrors, challenging. "You're in love with him."

Sören wasn't going to lie. "Yes."

Sören fell apart then, crying the tears he'd been holding back. Maglor came over to him and drew Sören onto his lap, cradled and rocked him, making soothing noises as Sören was wracked by broken sobs. *I blew it with Anthony. And it's for the best. But it still hurts...* "Oh god. I love him," Sören admitted. "I hate that I love him, but I love him. I fucking love him. I'm a fucking idiot -"

"Shhhhh, Ada. You're not an idiot." Maglor pet Sören's curls and kissed his brow. He cupped Sören's chin in his hand and made Sören look into his eyes again. "I've known you love him for awhile now."

"Jesus."

Maglor patted him. Then his sympathetic look became stern. "Why don't you just tell him how you feel? Why don't you guys, you know... try to resolve all that tension, if you get what I mean?"

Sören absolutely got what he meant. Sören exhaled, feeling his heart break even more. "I'm immortal. He's not. I understand now why a relationship between an immortal and a mortal doesn't work."

Maglor facepalmed and made noises like a dying whale. When he pulled his hand away from his face his eyes were too bright, with unshed tears of his own. "The irony of *you* saying that to *me*. I seem to remember you telling me two years ago not to push you away and keep wandering forever alone -"

"Well, that was before I knew what this was like," Sören said, gesturing to his now-immortal body.

"So are you telling me I should break up with Ali? Hurt your cousin?" Maglor raised an eyebrow.

"No," Sören said, a little too vehemently; the thought horrified him. "I'm not. If you... if you're at peace with the inevitable, I'm not going to tell you guys not to..." Sören couldn't finish his train of thought.

Maglor scowled. "What makes you think your situation is all that different?"

"Because it fucking *is*. It's bad enough that I'm worked up constantly over Frankie having post-surgery complications, and when that's over my brain will find something else to stress out about. I love Frankie, but what I feel for her is a fraction of what I feel for Anthony. Like I said, if you made your peace with... stuff... I can't and won't tell you what to do, I can only make rules for myself. But I get it, now, why you left in 2014. I get it why you spent so long by yourself -"

"Hells, Ada, it hurts me to hear you talk like this." Maglor's jaw trembled and the tears began to spill from his eyes. "I was willing to take a chance on you. I was willing to bear the hurt of eventually losing you, to have you in my life a little longer. I..." Maglor broke down sobbing too.

"Oh god." Sören couldn't bear making Maglor cry. *My Song. My heart.* Sören threw his arms around Maglor and hugged him tight, and now Sören was the one rocking them. "Oh god, Maglor, don't cry. Please, Kanafinwë. I'm sorry -"

Maglor crushed Sören's mouth to his, kissing him deep. They needed to forget, needed to get lost together for awhile. Maglor rose, picking Sören up in his arms like he weighed nothing, and began carrying him out of the forge. But as soon as they were outside, the sun rising pink and gold, dew sparkling on the grass like diamonds, they couldn't wait. Sören grabbed Maglor's head and kissed him back, and the next thing Sören knew, Maglor set him down on the grass and they fell on each other, all hunger and passion, the heat between them rivaling the fire of the forge.

Chapter 31

It was Friday, August twenty-seventh - it had been ten days since Anthony had last seen Sören. Anthony kept trying to tell himself that the break was necessary, he was too attached to Sören, and he needed to re-evaluate their relationship, which was increasingly looking more like a romantic one than that of a sentinel and his charge.

But he loved Sören, and the absence just intensified that longing for him.

The tension had also reached a boiling point. Anthony was *horny*. He hadn't been laid in months, because one-night stands felt like a poor substitute for what he really wanted. He knew that the sexual frustration was making his angst worse, and probably going out and picking up some submissive little twink he could pound all night would do him some good. He knew he needed to start moving on and try to find another man to obsess over, but his life with MI6 wasn't such that he could just sign up for a dating or hookup app and let any random stranger into his life - not to mention that he knew that could potentially lead into an enemy agent's trap, even if he was very, very careful.

So a gay bar was what he had to work with. As an introvert he found the performativity of it exhausting, and he once again felt like he was getting too old for this. Nonetheless, he found himself getting ready, going with something simple that was neither too dressy nor too casual - black trousers, a white long-sleeved button-down shirt - and he had just styled his hair when there was a knock at the door.

Anthony, as a rule, did not get random, surprise visits from people who "just happened to be in the neighborhood". He did not interact with his neighbors in the apartment complex and they did not interact with him - people kept to themselves in this place, which was one of the reasons why he'd chosen this location - so he highly doubted it was a neighbor asking to borrow a cup of sugar or something of the like. Anthony's heart skipped a beat, and he paused, hoping whoever it was either had the wrong address or was just trying to sell him something or convert him to their weird cult and would go away if he didn't answer, but there was another knock. Anthony reached out with the Force but he couldn't sense Sören or another familiar presence.

Preferring to err on the side of caution, Anthony quietly went to the bedroom and retrieved his Glock. As there was a knock on the door for the third time, Anthony called out, "I'm coming," and with the Glock behind his back, he marched to the door and opened it.

It was Dooku. Of course, Dooku was very good at shielding himself, which was why Anthony hadn't picked up the energy pattern. This was unexpected, and Anthony's eyebrows shot up at the sight of him, then he breathed a sigh of relief that it was *just* Dooku and not something like an enemy agent who'd done too much digging around and found him. Anthony and MI6 both were very careful to cover his tracks, but even so, it was a fear that never fully left Anthony's mind.

Anthony's moment of relief was quickly chased by panic. It was *unlike* Dooku to just drop by randomly, and he hoped that something hadn't happened to Sören. Anthony's heart beat faster, and then he realized Dooku was just standing there in the doorway, trying to keep his expression neutral but his brow was furrowed slightly, as if to say *Well?*

"Er," Anthony said. He cleared his throat. "Come in."

Anthony stepped aside, and Dooku walked in, and when Anthony closed the door Dooku noticed the Glock and his face registered alarm.

"I didn't know who it was," Anthony explained. "In my line of work, it's better to assume the worst -"

"Of course," Dooku said with a small nod.

"Uh, sit down." Anthony walked into the kitchen and set the Glock down on the counter. "May I get you anything? Coffee? Tea?" He noticed Dooku was in his white chef's uniform, and guessed he had just come from work.

"I shan't stay long," Dooku said. "I stopped here before coming home, they'll be expecting me."

"All right." Anthony got himself a bottle of water and sat in the armchair, looking at Dooku on the couch.

Craig came trotting out and cautiously went over to Dooku, sniffing. Dooku chuckled and leaned in, allowed the cat to smell his hand before Dooku began petting the cat. Craig hopped up on the couch with a "Prrp?" and Dooku smiled fondly, stroking the cat.

The way Dooku's dark eyes twinkled, crinkling at the corners, made him more handsome, and Anthony cursed under his breath. This was absolutely the wrong time for Dooku to show up, when Anthony was horny like this. He wouldn't be so crass as to try to seduce the older man, but Anthony couldn't deny that Dooku was a hot silver fox, and that deep, velvet voice of his just added to his sexiness. Anthony's cheeks burned as he thought about the way he perved on the idea of Sören and Dooku making love together, how delicious it probably looked, and that had turned into fantasies of a threesome with them, enjoying both of them at once. *Jesus Christ, I don't need this right now.*

Dooku looked away from the cat and at Anthony, realizing he needed to keep to his word of not staying long. He gave the cat a final pat and straightened his posture. Anthony realized then the reason why Dooku kept shielded as tightly as he did was because when he let it go, his touch in the Force was *enormous*, loud and big and bright, like sharing a room with a supernova. It was impressive, and slightly intimidating. *Like a king.*

"You're here because of Sören," Anthony said, point-blank. "Is he... is he all right?"

"Bodily, yes," Dooku said.

Anthony gave another small sigh of relief. Then he braced himself, because he knew Dooku had worded that deliberately.

"As far as mentally, well..." Dooku leaned back in his seat and steepled his hands. "As you know, Sören is taking the break with Frankie as a full breakup and that's been... affecting him. But I daresay his break with you is affecting him just as badly, if not worse."

"Yeah." Anthony looked down and exhaled sharply, wishing he hadn't agreed to Sören "needing space"... wishing that he'd backed down from asking him to try driving again. The thought that he'd caused Sören pain made him want to rip his own heart out. Anthony looked back up at Dooku. "Did he tell you what happened?"

"He told me you suggested that he should attempt driving again. As you know, it's not a

suggestion he's particularly keen on. In honesty, I understand both sides of it. I sympathize with Sören's reluctance to trigger another panic attack when he's already feeling vulnerable. I also do agree with you that Sören should consider the possibility he might have to flee a bad situation by car, behind the wheel, and it would be better if he were already prepared. But I've learnt from past experience with him that when Sören has it in his mind to do something or not do something... he's not one who can be swayed easily. He's more likely to do the swaying."

"I still get the sense he would get in trouble more often if it weren't for you." Anthony raised an eyebrow.

"Yes. You may have noticed, but I am as much a father figure to Sören as a lover. He needs that. And I get the sense Sören is a sort of surrogate brother for you... but perhaps a bit more."

Their eyes met, and held. Anthony's face was on fire, and he felt his cock stirring again. Anthony was an only child who'd always wanted siblings, and his friendship with Sören was the closest he'd ever come to having a brother. It wasn't lost on him that the "us against the world" feeling was somewhat incestuous in nature, and the thought of him asking Sören *does my brother like that?* as he fucked Sören hard filled him with shame and a wicked thrill at the same time.

Anthony pushed the dirty thoughts aside, hoping Dooku couldn't see them with the Force. But he knew, from the way Dooku was addressing him, that Dooku *did* know his attraction to Sören, there was no use hiding it.

There was no use, period. "It doesn't matter," Anthony said, squaring his shoulders. "He hates me right now, I'm sure."

Dooku threw back his head and laughed, a quiet chuckle that became a resonant, booming laugh. The big grin as he laughed looked downright goofy, but it was charming. Then Dooku gave a little cough and got more serious. Anthony could feel the faint broadcast of *you really don't know, do you?* and wondered what that was about. "If he does, it doesn't mean he doesn't also love you," Dooku said, amusement lingering in his eyes. "I speak from experience. We haven't had many arguments over the last few years..." *Now,* before that *is another story,* Dooku broadcasted. Anthony wondered what was going on with *that* - the dossier said Sören and Dooku hadn't met until 2017. "But we have had a few and they were... memorable. Sören has a filthy temper when provoked, anyone who gets to know him learns that's part of the package deal. Yes, he's angry. But it will upset him even more if you keep staying away."

"He told me we needed a break. I'm not going to force my presence on him..."

"No," Dooku said. "That's why I'm here. I'm personally inviting you to have family dinner with us as usual this Sunday evening. Your absence, and that of Frankie and Margrét, made it feel rather quiet and empty. At least if you come over, things are somewhat back to normal."

"And he won't get upset seeing me there?" Anthony frowned - he could just picture the explosion now. "He's not going to get even angrier with me?"

"Since I am the one inviting you, I am willing to take the fall, if it comes to that. But something tells me Sören misses you as much as you miss him, if not more, and he'll be more relieved than upset to see you again and have the 'break' put to a stop."

Anthony considered. He wanted to believe what Dooku was saying was true - Dooku had been Sören's partner for close to four years and knew him very well. But he was still afraid it would be throwing gasoline on the fire, that it would just make things worse.

Then Anthony realized what Dooku had said just a moment ago.*If he does, it doesn't mean he doesn't also love you.* "He... he loves me?"

Dooku nodded solemnly.

Anthony's breath hitched. He felt like his heart could break - both in a happy and a sad way. He had sensed Sören's attraction across their Force bond, but even so, having this confirmation from one of the people closest to him was powerful. And yet... he knew even if best-case scenario he showed up on Sunday and Sören was happy to see him, Sören was probably going to keep him at an arm's length indefinitely. Anthony was mortal, after all, just like Frankie was, and Sören seemed to be of the impression that he couldn't handle dealing with attachment and mortality. And on Anthony's end, he worried about crossing that line with the man he was supposed to be protecting. He was already emotionally compromised enough, he didn't want to be in the position of having to make necessary safety decisions that Sören would be upset about and hesitating on them because he didn't want problems with his partner. If his department was compromised and an enemy agent found out Anthony and Sören were more than just guard and protectee, Sören could be used as a hostage to try to manipulate MI6 or get classified information.

The more immediate concern was the man sitting in front of him. "I know that you and Marcus and Sören have a polyamorous arrangement, but I don't assume you're OK with him screwing any random person."

"No," Dooku said, "I'm not. But you're not a random person. If you want to pursue him, you needn't worry about myself and... Marcus objecting to it. We shan't stand in your way, I will only tell you that I would appreciate not having our arrangement with him interfered with too much, we're nesting, I still want a large share of his time..."

"Of course."

"But I speak for both Marcus and myself, we encourage it. I would like to see poor Sören ease the angst a bit, it is worrisome to me. I'd like our lives to have some peace for awhile. I understand these things have to happen organically, so please don't take this as trying to rush you, but Anthony, allow me to be perfectly blunt here..." Dooku gave him a stern look. "The two of you need to fuck."

Anthony had taken that moment to take a sip of his bottled water and he promptly ended up wearing it. He couldn't believe that sentence had come out of Dooku's mouth, with his cultured RP accent and his reserve, his old-fashioned manners. Anthony's jaw dropped open and he tried to find words, and just noises came out, like a wounded cow. Dooku shook with silent laughter. Craig headbutted Dooku as if to agree with him, and Dooku started skritching the cat again.

"He's lovely," Dooku said. "As you know, I am quite fond of cats."

"He keeps me sane. Somewhat."

Dooku gave a small, sympathetic smile, and then his cell phone vibrated in his pocket. Dooku chuckled and nodded as he checked it. "It's a text from Sören, asking if I'm all right. As I told you, I came here from work, and he's wondering why I'm a little late." Dooku sent back a reply, and rolled his eyes as he put his phone back in his pocket. "This newfangled

technology."

"OK boomer," Anthony said under his breath before he could stop himself. He couldn't help being amused by the thought of a smartphone as "newfangled", considering it had been out for over a decade.

Dooku shot him a look, indicating he'd heard that. "I used to have a flip phone up until a few years ago, long after it fell out of fashion. Even that felt... unnatural." Dooku scowled. "I can only imagine how much more strange and complicated technology will be in the next ten, twenty, thirty years - and I will be here to see it, and I shall probably feel even more out of step. The things we do for love, I suppose." Dooku rose from the couch - Anthony was very keenly curious to hear the story of how Dooku and Sören became immortal, he knew Ingmar Borovkov had something to do with it but he didn't know all the details. He wondered if he ever would. Anthony wasn't going to keep Dooku and grill him about it tonight, that was for sure; Sören was waiting.

Anthony walked Dooku to the door. "Thank you for... you know. Trying," Anthony said.

Dooku patted Anthony's shoulder; his touch made Anthony tingle, Anthony's cock stirring again. Anthony resisted the urge to lean in, kiss him, and suggest it shouldn't just be he and Sören who fuck, but Dooku was welcome to join in. Things were already complex enough with Sören, he had to take this one step at a time - if they were even taking steps. Anthony wasn't so sure that was a good idea, still. But smelling Dooku's cologne and looking into those dark chocolate eyes was making it harder to resist stepping towards a threesome.

"It is not just Sören's welfare I am concerned about, but yours." Their eyes met, and held. "I have grown accustomed to your presence on Sunday evenings. I would like to be your friend too, especially if you become one of Sören's partners, it would be good for us to be closer."

It would be good for us to be a lot *closer. Like, intimate.* Anthony's face was on fire again. "I agree. Maybe we could... do something, sometime." *Like suck each other off.* Anthony hoped Dooku couldn't pick up on any of that.

"I'd like that. Sören tells me you are an avid reader. We could discuss literature."

If Anthony didn't know better, "discuss literature" sounded like one of the more creative euphemisms he'd heard. Now Anthony's face was really on fire. He smiled, holding back as fiercely as he could. "I'll see you on Sunday evening. I hope, for everyone's sake, my presence doesn't create a problem."

"I doubt it will. And thank *you* for being willing to... keep trying with him." Dooku raised a hand and headed towards the stairwell. "Have a good evening, Anthony."

"You too."

Anthony quietly closed the door. He decided he wasn't going to go to a gay bar tonight. He needed to come *NOW*. He rushed off to the bedroom, got his clothes off as quickly as he could, climbed into bed, and got out his toys. Soon he was lost in an intense fantasy of Sören riding him, which became Sören riding him as Dooku fucked him. After Anthony climaxed, the shatter of his release also shattered him emotionally and he sobbed into his pillow, wanting to hold Sören more than anything in the world.

He knew then that any last shred of professionalism he had about it was gone. He was

going to let Sören decide what he wanted, but he wasn't going to push Sören away if Sören wanted this. He hoped it wouldn't create a situation with his assignment. Or any other sort of problems.

Anthony pinched the bridge of his nose and sighed. Right now getting there felt like its own problem.

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Anthony's heart pounded as he walked to the front door of Sören's mansion on Sunday afternoon. With one hand behind his back, he leaned in and rang the doorbell, and shifted his weight from one foot to the other as he waited.

Sören answered the door. His eyes widened with disbelief as he saw Anthony standing there, and then there was more surprise as Anthony pulled his other hand from behind his back, presenting a bouquet of sunflowers, peach roses, lavender and eucalyptus. He'd wanted to get Sören a bouquet of flowers as a peace offering, and thought about a dozen roses, which was classic, but worried about it being interpreted as a romantic gesture - which it absolutely was; this was, too, but Anthony wanted it to be more subtle. The bouquet was unique, not something Anthony would have thought to arrange himself but when he saw it in the flower shop it seemed to suit Sören.

Sören's face lit up as he took the flowers, and Anthony knew he'd made the right choice. "They're... they're beautiful." Sören bit his lower lip, and Anthony felt that all-too-familiar thrust in his loins, fighting the urge to grab Sören and kiss him. Sören cleared his throat and stepped aside. "Come in," Sören said.

Anthony walked in, feeling a flood of relief. They weren't out of the woods*yet*, but so far, so good. And as Anthony walked into the living room, he felt the energy of this place - these people - surround and enfold him, like a big hug. He felt like he had come home.

Chapter 32

As Anthony took a seat on the couch and the cats went over to him, Sören couldn't deny that he'd missed Anthony terribly and the sight of him was welcome. But Sören still felt wary, remembering their last conversation, and all of the complicated feelings that had resulted in Sören saying they needed a break from each other. None of that was resolved yet. Sören wasn't entirely sure it was a good idea for them to "pick up where they left off" and continue this dance of longing, and making decisions and suggestions clouded by that desire.

And yet, it was so good to see Anthony again that Sören could have cried.

Sören went to the kitchen to put the flowers in a vase; Dooku was working on preparing dinner. Dooku looked at Anthony and said, "It's going to be a few hours before the meal is ready, if the two of you want to catch up a bit in the meantime. I imagine the two of you have a lot you need to fu -" Dooku quickly corrected himself. "Talk about."

Sören narrowed his eyes. Both Dooku and Maglor had gotten on his case about needing to have "the talk" with Anthony, and releasing some of that sexual tension. Sören still didn't think going there was a good idea, as much as he desperately wanted to; he'd been fantasizing about Anthony more and more lately.

Sören's eyes met Anthony's across the room, and Anthony gave a small nod. Anthony cocked his head to one side and asked, "So... do you want to go for a ride?"

Sören almost dropped the flowers he was putting into the vase of water. *Mind, gutter.* Sören felt himself wrinkling his nose and biting his lower lip; he shoved away the mental image of riding Anthony's cock to climax, and said, "Jæja, I suppose we could go somewhere and do something." If nothing else, they needed to have a discussion about the last conversation they had.

"I can watch the kids," Maglor said. *In case the two of you want some privacy.*

Sören raised an eyebrow, knowing what Maglor was getting at. "You can watch Kate and Tori; I'd like to bring the baby." It wasn't just a safeguard against going there with Anthony right now, but Sören had been spending a lot of time in the forge lately so he wanted to be near his son as much as possible.

It was late afternoon and the sun was about to set on the late winter day. Sören threw on a black hoodie over his T-shirt - it was just a little chilly - and after he put on the baby sling, followed Anthony out to the Audi. For the first few minutes rolling down the street there was a long, awkward silence, as if both of them were trying to figure out what to say, and then Anthony said, "You want to get ice cream? I know it's before dinner but a little something probably won't spoil your appetite."

Sören's mind went in the gutter again with the word *appetite*. He wondered if Anthony could keep up with him sexually. Sören cleared his throat and made himself focus on the here and now. "OK."

"I figure we can get ice cream and sit somewhere and talk for awhile. Actually, I know where."

After the ice cream shop, Anthony took them to Lily Park, which was near an old

Borovkov Enterprises building. They found a bench and sat, eating ice cream and watching the sun go down in a glorious blaze of orange, hot pink and electric violet in cornflower blue. It was even lovelier in a setting like this, with the greenery and the pond, the tranquility of his son snuggled against his chest. Sören smiled at the black swans swimming around.

"I like to come here now and again and clear my head," Anthony said.

"I can see why. It's beautiful."

Anthony gave a little smile. "When I was a boy, my mum used to take me to watch swans. I've always loved swans."

Sören felt a frisson down his spine. He gave a tight smile, thinking of when Fëanor burnt the swan-boats. He pushed himself back to the present once more, watching the black swans glide on the sunset-reflected water.

"Sören..." Anthony took a deep breath. "I want to apologize if I came off as pushy or bossy the last time I saw you. I'm just trying to help. In my line of work, we have to anticipate anything and everything that can go wrong. While it's not necessarily true that you might be forced to drive for your own survival someday, I also don't think it's wise to discount the possibility, either. I was only trying to prepare you for that because it's a lot easier to drive out of a sticky situation if you've already been in the habit of driving, as opposed to getting behind the wheel and freezing then. But I probably came on too strong, and... Sören, I know you have PTSD. I know your trauma and anxiety isn't going to go away overnight. And I don't want you to think that I judge you for not driving, or think you're 'weak', or..."

Sören looked down. He had, in fact, been thinking about this over the last almost-fortnight they'd been avoiding each other - he'd gotten past his discomfort with guns enough to learn to use one, and he was more likely to be in a situation that needed a fast escape by car, than a situation where he had to shoot someone. "I'll try. I can't promise it'll be more than once - if I get behind the wheel and I have another panic meltdown, I'm not going to try again and I *really* don't want you pushing. But I'll try, once."

Anthony's mouth opened, his eyes widening as if he couldn't believe what Sören just said, and then he nodded and patted Sören's shoulder. Just that little touch got Sören going. "I'm proud of you for even being willing to consider trying one more time. I know that's a huge step."

Sören nodded. "I only ask that if I'm going to do this and you help me... we take the day to do *just* that. Maybe a run, but no Krav, no range, that day, my adrenaline will be keyed up enough. I'm also gonna need at least a few days to prepare myself mentally."

"All right. Maybe this Thursday?"

"OK." Sören already felt nervous, even though it was days away, but he understood why Anthony was concerned about it, even as Sören didn't like it at all.

"So speaking of all of that... what have you been up to since..." Anthony's voice trailed off, not wanting to say "since we took a break".

"I'm still running and, uh, doing my pole exercises. I'm not running on the Bondi trail, but through the neighborhood and the surrounding area. The hills are a bit of a challenge, which is probably a good thing for building up endurance."

"Yes."

"And I've been working in the forge. I made a sword."

"Can I see?" Anthony looked delighted.

Sören's face flushed, delighted that he was delighted, but... "It's not quite done yet. I'm still working on the final finishing touches." While it wasn't the fanciest sword in the world - Sören was going more for functionality than flair - he nonetheless wanted it to *feel* like his, so he was engraving the blade and making the hilt to his liking.

"I really like the knife you made me. I'm sure the sword will be a work of art." Anthony smiled a little. "I know painting and showcasing your work is a risk for you because of how distinctive your style is, but maybe you could make things like swords until enough time passes where it's safe to exhibit your paintings again..."

Sören gave a nervous laugh, thinking of all the weaponry he crafted in his days as Fëanor. "I don't think I want to turn it into a business. I prefer making things custom, for one person and one person only, meant for them..."

"Well yes, Sören, there are smiths who take custom orders, just like you used to take commissions -"

I don't want to advertise "swords enchanted by Fëanor himself!" While that was some of how he'd done business back in the day, Elves coming far and wide for his craftsmanship, it felt like here and now, if something was meant to have something by him, it would be at his discretion. "No, I mean, like... gifts."

"All right. I just, you know, thought that your work *is* a gift, and deserves exposure. But I suppose I'm being pushy again."

Sören snickered. "I know it's encouragement, not trying to tell me what to do. You did say 'maybe you could', not 'you absolutely must'."

"Still." Anthony sighed. "I remember what you said last time and I don't want you to think I think you're my 'improvement project'." He turned to face Sören and their eyes met. "I like you just the way you are."

Sören bit his lower lip. His face was on fire now, his stomach doing flip-flops. He wanted to take Anthony's face and kiss him. He also wanted to cry. He had never been "good enough" for his guardians, or past partners like Justin Roberts. Maglor and Dooku built him up, they adored him and Sören knew it, but Sören still had deep-seated insecurities, and Anthony's acceptance soothed him.

Anthony seemed to sense he got Sören choked up. "Awww." He patted Sören, then he checked his watch. "Since dinner is going to be a bit late, do you want to come with me so I can check on my cat and feed him? I don't want him to get mad."

Sören chuckled. "Sure."

They got up and Anthony waved goodbye to the swans, which turned Sören's chuckle into a full-bodied laugh; he found that adorable.

"Sorry," Anthony said, with a sheepish grin, his cheeks flushing pink. "I used to wave

goodbye to the swans as a kid, it's... a force of habit."

"I like it," Sören said. He booped Anthony's nose, then immediately regretted that little touch, feeling like he'd touched fire. "I like what a dork you are in private. It's like finding out James Bond is really an anime and gamer geek who snorts when he laughs."

Anthony rolled his eyes, but he was still smiling. "Come on, you."

The sunset faded to twilight as they drove out to Anthony's apartment complex; Sören thought about asking Anthony what he'd been up to in his absence but he knew Anthony's line of work was such that probably a lot of that was classified MI6 business. Sören wondered too if Anthony had hooked up with anyone during their break, decided he didn't want to know about that, and started kicking himself internally, not liking the flare of jealousy, especially when he himself had other partners.

You don't own him, for fuck's sake. The two of you aren't even together.

Anthony also seemed like he was quietly enjoying the sunset, or perhaps lost in thought, or both. Sören leaned back and watched the sky, and his snuggling baby. It did seem almost blasphemous to break the silence, a moment of peace.

The sky was deep blue dusk with lingering streaks of gold as they got out of the car. The baby gurgled and Sören stroked his hair and cheek on the way up to Anthony's flat. Once they got in, Craig came right to the door and began circling Anthony's ankles, meowing like Anthony had been gone for hours.

"Yes, yes, I know you're starving," Anthony teased. Craig gave a long, plaintive howl.

Sören sat on the couch while Anthony went to the kitchen and opened a can of cat food. After Anthony filled Craig's bowl, Craig took a sniff and then trotted away, hopping up on the couch to get pettings from Sören. Anthony shook his head and snickered. "He begs for food, then he decides it's not good enough."

"Cats, seriously." Sören skritched Craig behind the ears, smiling at the cat's purr. "They're assholes, but we love them."

"Yeah, Craig has been very good for me." Anthony sighed as he sat in the armchair.

"How did you end up with him, anyway?"

"My mum gave him to me so I wouldn't be alone Down Under." Anthony frowned a little. "At the time, I only thought I'd be in Sydney for a few weeks but I think she knew I wasn't coming back anytime soon. My mum... knows things. You know what I mean, I'm sure."

"She's like you?"

"Mostly. Her abilities are milder than mine, but they're there. I was closer to her than my father, not that my relationship with my dad was ever bad, but he was, you know. Normal." Anthony gave a nervous little laugh.

"Did he know that..."

"Yes. He knew, and he knew to keep his mouth shut. His brother was Force-sensitive too. The gay one. The war hero. The reason why I joined the service. I wanted to be a hero too, but I'm not." Anthony closed his eyes and for a moment Sören could feel the years of

regret, his distaste for his time in the Gulf. Then Anthony opened his eyes and Craig leapt over onto his lap, seeming to know Anthony needed some love. Anthony began to pet Craig, smiling; Craig's purr got louder.

"You're my hero," Sören said softly. "I owe you a lot for trying to help me 'get good', as they say."

Anthony's eyes were soft - Sören could feel Anthony was touched by that just like he'd touched Sören by saying he liked Sören just as he was - but then Anthony shook his head and said, "You're the one putting in the hard work, the heavy lifting. I can't take credit for that."

"It helps that you're so encouraging."

"Well, I believe in you." Their eyes met, and then Anthony looked back at the cat, who got up on his hind legs, front paws on Anthony's shoulder, and started headbutting Anthony's face. Anthony laughed and continued to skritch and stroke the cat. "I guess Craig believes in you too."

"It seems awfully nice of your mum, to part with her cat so you'd have a companion and not be totally alone out here."

"Yes, although... she didn't have Craig all that long when she gave him to me." Anthony kissed the cat's forehead and started chucking the cat's chin, rubbing his nose in the fluffy fur. Sören's heart melted, and the baby cooed happily. "My mum was friendly with the neighbors, and one of them died. His partner decided to move, and he needed to rehome some of the cats."

Sören's hair stood on end. He realized now why the cat being named Craig was somewhat familiar and he hadn't been able to figure out why, all these months that felt like years. It wasn't every day one encountered a cat named Craig, even less often a smoke point Siamese cat named Craig. He took the shot. "Were the neighbors named Joaquin Gonzales and Oberon Canobie, aka Qui-Gon and Obi?"

"...Yes."

"That's where we got Rasputin and Pumpkin. When Nico and I went to the wake, we met your mother, Elaine."

"I knew you'd met her, I had to do clean-up that day with you two using the portal-gate-thing." Anthony wagged his finger.

*That was you in the Audi.*A shiver went through Sören. *That was you at the Smithy, doing whatever it was you did to those onlookers harassing us.*

"I didn't realize that was how you got the cats, though. I knew they seemed familiar but couldn't place it." Anthony laughed softly. "Small world, I guess. Here, I'm going to hit the loo." Anthony put Craig on the couch and stepped down the hall.

As Sören sat there waiting, his mind's eye rushed with images, remembering.

Elaine showing off her glorious villa in Blackheath, with that amazing garden that sang with the Living Force. *...my son does - he's got rather a gift - so when he's around the garden is his baby.* And of course, Anthony liked to putter in their garden during the spring and summer; he'd brought waratahs as a housewarming present when they moved into

the mansion in Sydney.

The brush of silver-gold energy in Elaine's garden, the vision of Galadriel - which had seemed so random at the time, especially when they hadn't been the best of friends - and Sören asking her, *Artanis. Where is your father.*

And her reply: *Closer than you think.*

That touch from Galadriel hadn't been random. She was watching that garden, watching that house...

Anthony in Lily Park. *I've always loved swans.*

Sören's heart was hammering in his ears, the world seemed to spin. It had been right in front of him this entire fucking time, and only just *now* was he figuring it out. *I'm an idiot. I am a supreme fucking idiot.* He heard the toilet flush, he heard the run of the sink with hand-washing noises, and then Anthony stepped out and asked, "Shall I take you home now?"

Sören's mouth opened, suddenly dry. He couldn't make words. *Arafinwë.*

Sören nodded, and then a few seconds later he found his words again. "Já. You can take me home."

You are my home.

But of course, he couldn't tell Anthony - not right now. This situation was going to have to be navigated very, very carefully. It was like defusing a bomb.

Chapter 33

"Are you ready?"

Sören took a deep breath and gave a small nod. "About as ready as I'll ever be."

Anthony nodded too. He felt a twinge of guilt - he*knew* how much Sören didn't like this; even though Sören was trying to keep his shielding up, Anthony could still feel Sören's anxiety hammering and roaring across their bond, like a violent storm. But Sören had agreed to try to drive this once, and they had made an appointment, and Anthony was holding him to it, feeling like procrastination would do more harm than good.

For Sören's first attempt at driving, Anthony didn't want to get him on the road right away after so long, and especially not with trying to drive on the highway. They were in the parking lot of Anthony's apartment complex, and Anthony was going to have Sören pull out of Anthony's parking space, drive a lap around the parking lot, and slide back into the parking spot. He thought that was easy enough.

Anthony had been sitting behind the wheel of his Audi, and now they both got out of the car to trade places. As they exited the car and maneuvered - Anthony walking behind the car, Sören walking in front of the car - Anthony glanced over at him and gave a small, reassuring smile. Sören couldn't smile back, his face like a stone; Anthony could see the dread in Sören's eyes. Anthony's heart skipped a beat, his own stomach turning to ice, wishing there was something he could do to ease Sören's anxiety.

Once Anthony was in the passenger's seat and Sören was in the driver's seat, Anthony handed the keys to him. He could have just left them in the ignition, but he felt part of the re-learning process was muscle memory and it would be easier of Sören put the car key in himself. Sören put the key in the lock, and the engine began to purr. *So far, so good.*

Then Sören sat there, wide-eyed, like he didn't know what to do next. Anthony saw him glancing in the rear-view mirror, as if to make sure nobody was coming out behind them, but instead of taking the wheel and pulling back, Sören continued to sit there, and after he'd been sitting there for a full minute, not moving the car, just frozen, the shield around Sören's mind *broke* like a dam and Anthony felt like he was drowning, suffocating in the flood of fear.

Anthony was instantly transported back to that day in October, when he'd seen the white flash in his mind's eye, felt like he was dying, felt the disturbance in the Force like thousands of lights were going out, fading to dark, fire to ashes and dust. Anthony could see, now, Sören on the Ring Road, driving as it hit, as the white flash enveloped the car, enveloped him, Sören could see something - someone; someone he loved - hit with a bubble of black Force lightning and vaporized.

NO!

Three blinding lights, seeming to come from Sören's soul, blasting out, the realization that the white flash was *him*. Losing control of the car, realizing with horror that they had been very lucky, *I could have killed us both*as Sören and Marcus came out of the wreck.

Sören was reliving all of that. Anthony could feel him trying to struggle past it, like a moth

breaking free of a cocoon, like a drowning man trying to reach for a rope thrown to him. But the fear was overpowering, trapping him in the flashback. *It's over. It's ended. You know you can get around a parking lot safely,* Sören told himself. But he was shaking now, and at last he made a high-pitched noise through clenched teeth and turned off the engine.

"*Fuck.*" Sören slapped the wheel and then he leaned over it, continuing to shake, gasping for breath.

"Sören, it's OK." Anthony put a hand on his shoulder. "You tried. I know it's hard -"

"I'm a fucking failure."

"You're not a failure."

"I tried and I didn't succeed, right? That's a failure."

"*No,*" Anthony said sternly, feeling frustrated that Sören was beating himself up like this, not wanting Sören to be so hard on himself. He'd seen things in the Gulf that had broken people; he himself had been profoundly not OK for weeks after whatever happened in October. "You didn't ask to have trauma. You *tried* and that *itself* is an accomplishment, when you've been so afraid -"

"That sounds like the same sort of bullshit kids on a sports team get told when they can't score worth a damn and they get a trophy just for showing up. Except a small child is less of a baby than I am."

Anthony could see this in Sören's mind's eye, too. His uncle Einar calling him a *vælandibarn* - Anthony didn't speak a word of Icelandic but he knew somehow it meant "crybaby". *I'll give you something to cry about.* Einar taking off his belt.

"You know what's bullshit?" Anthony's voice got softer, but more intense, seething with anger at Einar and everyone who'd ever hurt the beautiful, broken man seated next to him. "The attitude in society that boys can't cry. That men are supposed to always be strong and are never allowed to show emotions, especially when it hurts. You know as well as I do that you don't just 'get over' shit that happened. You're allowed to be afraid. I asked you to at least try, I didn't think you would necessarily succeed the first time. It's OK that you didn't. I won't push you to try again, if you think it'll wind you up too much, but if you ever do want to try again, I'm here to help you. Even if it means you don't succeed the next time. Or after that. Or after that. I don't think you're a failure."

"*Ég er fokking bilun.*" Sören turned to look at him now, his eyes wild with fear - and grief... and rage at his sense of powerlessness. Anthony could feel that, too, Sören's anger at himself, and anger at whatever enemies he had out there, that wouldn't let him just live his life. "*Ég þarf að koma skítnum í lag og ég get það ekki. Ég get ekki fokking gert það. Hvernig í fjandanum á ég að geta barist þegar tímabært er að vernda sjálfan mig og fjölskylduna mína, ef ég kemst ekki undir stýri helvítis fokking bíls án þess að missa skítinn minn?*"

Anthony loved the sound of Sören speaking Icelandic, and any other time it would have given him raging hard-on. But now, the words were like splinters of glass shattering from a broken soul, it *hurt*, and Anthony desperately wanted to make Sören's pain stop, somehow. He could feel Sören getting angrier and angrier with himself, it was feeling very warm inside the car all of a sudden, and Anthony felt like he needed to try to defuse the bomb before something happened, remembering the news of Katla. "Sören. Sören, I don't

speak Icelandic. Can you take a few deep breaths and tell me what you just said in English?"

Sören exhaled, and then he doubled over the steering wheel, falling apart in howling sobs as hard as Anthony had ever seen a man cry. He could feel those soul-deep wounds bleeding, and he ached, tearing at his heart. Anthony's own eyes teared up, and not thinking, just feeling, he reached out and pulled Sören into his arms, leaned in and held him as closely as he could in the awkwardness of their seating. He began to rock Sören in his arms, silent tears spilling down his cheeks, *needing* to comfort him, to reassure him that he was *enough*, he was in fact more than enough as far as Anthony was concerned. Anthony exhaled and found himself petting Sören's curls. "Sweetheart," he husked - the term of endearment just came out, the intensity of the moment bringing out that confession of feeling. Sören looked up, as startled at hearing it as Anthony was by saying it. Sören's brown eyes were still so beautiful, the sad puppydog eyes irresistible, and Anthony touched Sören's cheek, drawn into those hurt eyes as inexorably as an undertow. "I can't bear to see you so unhappy. I can't..." Anthony couldn't finish the sentence. Now he too was sobbing, hurting *so much* for the man he loved. "Dammit, Sören. I -"

He couldn't make words anymore. He grabbed Sören's face and kissed him, crushing their mouths together. The feel of those full, soft lips that had been tempting him for months sent a bolt through him right to his cock, and when their tongues met for the first time it was like tasting ambrosia. Anthony kissed Sören fiercely - every swirl of their tongues was saying the words he could not say, expressing feelings beyond words. Heat rose through him, cock throbbing, feeling almost ready to come in his pants, undone by just their kiss. He had been wanting this for so long, and it was never the right time. Now was still a bad time, but here they were, Sören kissing him back deep and hungry, as if all the grief and fear and rage had been transmuted to desire. Anthony lost himself in Sören's lips and tongue, even more delicious than he'd thought about; Sören knew how to kiss, each stroke of their tongues a promise of what Sören could do with that mouth... the way they could move inside each other.

They pulled apart for air, breathing harder. Anthony's head was spinning, heart racing faster. He still hurt for Sören beating himself up, but now his hurt was chased by elation, triumph - there was no way to fake the passion in that kiss, the feeling of *want* that crackled between them both. Their eyes met and Sören's eyes were all burning intensity now, as if Anthony was the only thing in the world that existed. Now Sören was the one to grab him and pull him forward, their lips together again, tongues playing, teasing. Anthony's hands rested on Sören's, tingling, kissing him like he was drinking deep, not able to get enough, wanting to stay lost in this moment of truth.

Their lips lingered, brushing softly, and they rubbed noses. Anthony caught his breath and looked into those sweet brown eyes again, Sören's pupils blown wide, lips slightly parted. Then Sören crinkled his nose and bit his lower lip, and Anthony fought back the urge to drag Sören by his hair out of the driver's seat into the back seat, or haul him upstairs.

Sören started giggling. Anthony was relieved and delighted to see him laugh - but also confused. He raised an eyebrow.

"Oh." Sören cleared his throat and gave a shy smile. "You know how people get gold stars that say 'you tried'? Well... I'm definitely seeing stars after that kiss."

Anthony laughed too, pleased that Sören was impressed with the kisses as he was. Sören's shy smile became a big grin. Sören looked at the windshield, out at the parking lot, then at the steering wheel, and his grin faded to a little frown, but he had a shy smile

again as he looked at Anthony.

"I'm sorry," Sören said. "I feel like I wasted your time -"

"Oh honey, *that* wasn't a waste of my time." Anthony took Sören's hand.

"I meant the... driving." Sören frowned again.

"There's no need to apologize. That wasn't a waste of my time either. I told you that you should try driving again. I knew going into this you might be able to, you might not. That's what trying is, it's not a guarantee of success. It's OK. I still don't think you failed or wasted my time."

Sören sighed and looked down. "I hate this." He quickly clarified, "Not the kiss." He smirked, then sobered up again. "I hate that I can't even get behind the wheel without a panic attack."

"Not everybody can do everything."

"I just..." Sören ran a nervous hand through his curls, rubbed his beard, and folded his arms. "I feel so fucking powerless." Sören leaned back. "I want to try again. Not today, but again, sometime."

"I won't tell you no - like I said, I'd feel safer knowing you can escape a sticky situation by car if you need to - but I'm not going to push you." Anthony gave a wry smile. "Hopefully by the time a situation like that would come around, self-driving, automated cars will be the norm."

"I'm surprised it's not already. Dag thought by 2020 for sure we'd all have flying cars that could drive themselves." Then Sören frowned again and Anthony knew he was missing his brother - Dag's disappearance, and the nature thereof, seemed to pour salt into the wound of Sören not being able to drive if his life or someone else's depended on it.

"I don't think any less of you for not driving," Anthony said, meaning it.

"It's not about that. I mean, mostly. I'm glad... I'm glad you don't think I'm some weak, pathetic loser -"

"God, *no*, Sören." Anthony narrowed his eyes. "It should be pretty obvious what I think of you, I hope."

"It's... it's something I need to prove to myself. But I'm not there." Sören looked down again. "I don't know if I'll ever get there."

"One step at a time." Anthony patted him. Then his hand reached up and rested on Sören's cheek. Their eyes met, and Anthony found himself playing with an errant curl, twining it around his finger. Sören's lips parted again. "Speaking of... what happened just now..."

"Jæja." Sören exhaled sharply. "That... was a long time in coming. I still have reservations about getting involved with a mortal, but I... can't deny how I feel about you."

"And shouldn't deny yourself, period. It seems cruel to cut yourself off from other people because you're worried about losing them, instead of enjoying the time you have."

"It feels crueler in the long run to have happiness and then have the rug yanked out from under me. That's... already happened enough. But..." Sören bit his lower lip again. "I have feelings for you. And I want to feel you."

"Do you want to go up to my flat, or..."

Sören shook his head. "Not today. The kiss was... amazing. But I'm having the adrenaline crash after the panic attack now and every time that happens I feel ill, like the flu is coming on, and that lasts for a few hours up to a full day. My constitution may have changed with immortality, but adrenaline still seems to work much the same."

"And brain freezes."

Sören threw his head back and laughed. Anthony couldn't help smiling, even as he felt disappointment that he was not, in fact, going to shag Sören senseless today, pent up as he was.

Then Sören went on, "Also, even though both Nico and... Marcus... have told me that you and I need to fuck already -"

"You too, huh? Nicolaas said the same thing to me privately."

Sören nodded, smirking. "I'm sure if I asked them if I could spend the night they'd say yes, but it's just... since I became a parent, doing that sort of thing on short notice feels different to me than before, when I didn't have any kids. I can't be as spontaneous as I used to, without feeling guilty, like I'm pawning off responsibility onto everyone else and using my family as free child care. So not tonight. And not tomorrow night, either, because I have a date with my husbands and again, they'd understand but I'd still feel... tacky."

"I understand," Anthony said nodding, though he was still a little disappointed. "I'll drive you home, if you want to rest."

"I'd appreciate that, *takk.*"

When they got out of the Audi to change places, they hugged. No kiss this time - that was too tempting - but it still felt damn good to hold Sören close, to know this time the hug was different, since they had mutually acknowledged their feelings. Anthony kissed the top of Sören's head and tousled his curls before he climbed in the driver's seat.

Anthony felt reluctant as he drove Sören back, but he also knew not to take it personally - it wasn't a rejection of him, it was a "not yet", not a hard no. Then Anthony's mind found an opportunity, and seized it. He cleared his throat. "I have an idea."

"Jæja?"

"On Saturday... I'd like to give you a little reward for trying to drive. Just the fact that you *tried*, when I know how much you were dreading it... it was still brave. Courage is not the absence of fear, but the willingness to try anyway, and you did that. I feel that merits some sort of celebration."

"A reward, huh?" There he was again, crinkling his nose and biting his lower lip.

Jesus. Anthony's cock stiffened uncomfortably. "Not that. Well... not immediately."

Sören grinned. Anthony's face flushed, and he grinned back.

Anthony explained, "I was thinking maybe we could take a trip. I know you love nature, and there are parts of Australia I'd love to see and haven't gotten a chance to see yet, since this case is a full-time job - when I'm not looking in on you I have to make sure other people aren't, I have to keep up with paper trails and electronic trails and the like. It also just feels lonely to go and do certain things by myself, wishing I had someone around to share them with. Now I do."

Sören nodded.

"So... one of the places I'm keen on seeing is the Three Sisters in the Blue Mountains. It would be a day trip - a drive there, we hike up, we come back. I've seen pictures and the view is spectacular." Anthony glanced over, watching Sören consider. "You game?"

"Sounds good." Sören looked over and smiled.

"One thing, though. It's best to get there very early, the later it is, the more tourists are around and it gets busier. You like crowds about as well as I do, so..."

"An early morning, ugh. Well, it's worth it for seeing something beautiful, I guess." Sören gave a sly little smile as he looked back out the window. "I'm sure the view of the mountains will be nice, too."

Anthony's face burned, and he felt himself grinning like an idiot, stomach doing cartwheels.

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Though Anthony intended that they would spend most of Saturday at the Blue Mountains, not spending the entire day horizontal, he nonetheless made a shopping trip on Friday so when he took Sören back to his flat after their trip, they could have a sensual and romantic first time. He got a bouquet of roses at a flower shop, a bottle of champagne at a liquor store, and at a department store he picked up an assortment of vanilla scented candles to have candlelight for ambiance, and a bottle of baby oil to give Sören an erotic massage. Just shopping for the scene of his seduction got Anthony all worked up, and it didn't help that Anthony kept thinking about Sören's Friday night date with Dooku and Marcus, the mental images of Sören, Dooku and Marcus having a threesome, turning into a fantasy of him being invited to a foursome with the three most delicious men he'd ever lain eyes on. Anthony ended up masturbating three times that night, and still woke up on Saturday morning feeling hungry.

What he hadn't planned on was the weather, and realized as he picked up Sören before the sunrise that he hadn't checked forecasts. There had been some light rain late last night, not at all like the late winter to early spring weather he was accustomed to in London - Australia was a very dry country - and as he and Sören headed out on the highway, the sun rising, they were driving into fog which wasn't optimal for viewing. The visibility was far from zero, it was much more of a fine mist than the pea soup he knew in London, but Anthony still frowned at it as he zipped down the road. "You still want to do this?"

Sören gave him a look. "I didn't wake up at bloody five in the morning for nothing."

Anthony chuckled. "You're cute when you make that face, you know."

Sören raised an eyebrow and his lips quirked. Anthony smiled a little when he saw Sören's cheeks turn pink. Sören looked out through the windshield and said, "It's not that bad. Actually... I like this weather, it reminds me of Akureyri." Sören sighed and turned to look out the window, watching the landscape in golden dawn and silver mists, the golden glow of dawn fading to a grey sky with silver-gold light through clouds. The sky was extraordinary, and Anthony supposed it wasn't entirely a bad thing they were going on this trip today.

Anthony could feel Sören's nostalgia and homesickness for his country, prompted by the fog. "I know you miss Iceland."

"I do. But... this is home now, and I accept it." Sören looked back at Anthony. "Australia has its own beauty. If I have to live someplace that isn't Iceland for the next twenty years or so, I'm glad it's here."

They spent the next while in silence; Sören seemed to be taking in every moment of the trip, watching the sky and the road intently, and Anthony didn't want to intrude on his thoughts. Anthony also liked that he and Sören didn't need to talk constantly. As different as they were in a lot of ways, they were very similar in some, one of which being they were both introverts who took a lot of time to reflect and go inward. This time the silence was companionable rather than awkward, two people who could just *be* with each other and didn't need to be entertaining all the time.

That sense grew stronger as they began their trek through the reserve. They began at Echo Point, a short distance from the bus stop. Even on an overcast day, with the mist swirling around the mountains, the view was breathtaking.

"It's an entire ocean of trees," Sören said, his voice hushed with reverence.

"As far as the eye can see," Anthony said, nodding. He'd seen the English countryside several times in his lifetime, but it was nothing like this, the trees seemingly endless. He tugged on the hem of Sören's sleeve and pointed. "There's the Three Sisters."

They were like three towers carved of rock, majestic in the foreground of the distant mountains and valley, the endless swath of trees. While Anthony wanted to take another trip on a sunny day for a better view not partially obscured by fog, he nonetheless appreciated the melancholy beauty of the Three Sisters rising out of the mists, then shrouded again, rising again, sun glinting off the clouds of fog. He could feel Sören appreciating it too.

"It's magical," Sören whispered.

It was possible to climb down into one of the sisters via a very narrow staircase. Anthony could feel Sören's anxiety kicking up again as they descended, but Sören made himself push through for the sake of the view, and the view was as gorgeous as expected. They looked out at the cliffs and the trees, breathless, in awe.

"It's like the land sings," Sören said.

Anthony took Sören's hand, glad to be sharing this moment with him, to share the wonder together, like they were rediscovering how good it was to be alive in this world, still full of beauty and grace despite the cruelties of life and humanity itself. Nature felt triumphant out here, a promise that life would endure, somehow.

That sense of wonder and magic intensified as they took a trail to Katoomba Falls. The uphill parts were a bit challenging but not terrible, and worth it for the trip through what looked like an enchanted forest. The rains of last night meant the falls were a bit more than a trickle and they watched, Sören laughing with delight at the misty waterfall.

From Katoomba Falls they walked back to Echo Point, taking the road rather than the trail for a bit less uphill time - Anthony didn't want Sören to be too worn out for later. Anthony had heard that there was a lower point with a better and quieter view of the Three Sisters, and they took that now. Enough time had passed on their hike that it was well into the morning and Anthony appreciated having less tourists about, but the foggy day also meant there weren't very many of them, and when they reached the lower part of the point they were, in fact, the only two people around.

The view was even more breathtaking here, and though there was still fog it was a bit less than before. Anthony and Sören stood there just looking, taking it all in - Anthony could feel the gears in Sören's head turning, as if Sören was photographing everything with his mind to paint later. Even though the view was spectacular and Anthony didn't want to stop looking at it, he found himself looking at Sören, finding the view of Sören observing, studying, *honoring* as gorgeous as the scenery. Not able to help himself, he put an arm around Sören's waist.

Sören moved closer. "Thank you so much for taking me here. This is... quite a reward for trying."

"You deserve to know that you aren't a failure, you aren't a waste of time." Anthony took Sören's chin and turned Sören's face to his, looking into his eyes. "You are good enough. You are... very precious to me."

Sören smirked. "My preciousssssss," he said in a Gollum voice.

Anthony laughed. "Yes. My precious."

Sören threw his arms around Anthony and this time it was Sören who initiated the kiss, deep and fierce and hot. Anthony groaned as their tongues met and stroked, his own arms wrapped around Sören, running his hands through Sören's curls, barely able to believe this was really happening, after months of longing. Anthony sucked on Sören's lower lip and their tongues played together teasingly before Anthony kissed Sören back, deeper, harder. His hands slid from Sören's hair down over Sören's chest and around to cup Sören's ass. They were both hard in their jeans, and Sören ground against him a little as they continued kissing, tasting, wanting.

Suddenly it felt very hot, like the temperature had shot up twenty degrees, and Anthony wondered if this was a normal occurrence when Sören got aroused, but that didn't quite seem right. His hair stood on end, a frisson down his spine - there was some sort of bright light shining on them, and Anthony's hackles went up, wondering if it was a drone, wondering if an enemy agency had intercepted them...

They pulled apart; Sören was seeing and feeling it too.

There was something coming out of the mists and towards them, a spherical object that looked like some sort of light source, but not anything Anthony had ever seen before. He had to squint and shield his eyes because it was so bright, much brighter than a bulb, brighter than even a klieg light. It was rushing at them now, coming right for Sören, and Anthony's military instincts kicked in, he grabbed Sören's arm and said, "Down," trying to pull Sören down on the ground with him, but to his shock Sören reached his hand out and

the glowing sphere came right into his hand.

Anthony froze, mouth open, barely able to breathe as he looked at the small sphere in Sören's hand - slightly smaller than a golf ball, like a very large jewel. It was, in fact, faceted like a jewel was, but brighter than any diamond, refracting seemingly endless rainbows. The jewel-thing in Sören's hand put them in a bubble of translucent white light - there were still no other tourists down here, no one to witness whatever the hell this was. Anthony still felt afraid, the logical part of him thought it could be a bomb....

...but he knew better. He'd dreamt of this stone. He'd dreamt of three of these stones, made by Sören, worn by Sören. This was his dream brought to life. Now Anthony pinched himself to make sure he wasn't still dreaming, and it hurt.

He didn't understand how something from his dreams could be real. He had seen a lot of weird shit during his time with MI6's classified, off-the-record paranormal department. He had seen a lot of weird shit even before that, in his life as a Force sensitive; he shuddered as he remembered the djinn in the Gulf. This made all of what he'd seen look normal.

Sören was also staring at the jewel-thing, himself in shock. "Holy shit," Sören whispered as he rolled the jewel around in his hand. "Holy. Fucking. Shit."

"I. Ah." Anthony couldn't make words. He couldn't even make *thoughts*. Something from his dreams, that he thought his subconscious had made up - some sort of symbolism as far as how Sören felt about him, how he felt about Sören - was actually real, and right in front of him. "Ah. Er."

"Isn't it beautiful?"

"Beautiful" didn't even seem like the right word. It wasn't simply like seeing a painting from one of the old masters in-person, it was like being inside that painting, but even that felt like a poor analogy as Anthony racked his brain for what, exactly, was the right word. Nothing seemed to do justice to the glowing, shimmering radiance in Sören's hand, so bright it was throwing off warmth...

...comfort and peace, like the bubble of light they were in was some sort of shield wall, keeping away everything bad, everything evil. That, too, made no sense, but Anthony's initial concern about it being a bomb was now a flood of relief... a feeling like something lost had been returned.

Jesus Christ, that makes no fucking sense.

Sören's grin was as bright as the stone in his hand. Anthony melted at the sight of Sören expressing such joy with his smile, his eyes. Anthony wanted to kiss him again, but it felt like the wrong thing to do, like this was some sort of sacred, holy moment and he needed to behave a certain way that he hadn't been instructed in.

Sören did a little twirl, holding the stone. "Wheeee!" He started laughing, the laughter echoing.

And then Sören began to cry. He fell to his knees, weeping as brokenly as Anthony had ever seen - even worse than the panic attack Sören had on Thursday, but this wasn't panic. There was still a feeling of grief, a feeling of *loss*, but it was more. It was much more. Sören was shaken to his core; Anthony thought of stories of people weeping in the presence of God or one of the saints. Anthony felt tears sting his own eyes. He wasn't sure exactly what he was witnessing, but it felt like a miracle, and he imagined it had to be

even moreso for Sören, especially if

that's his.

"Sören..." Anthony took a deep breath. *Here we fucking go.* "Sören, sweetheart... what... what is that?"

Sören looked up, wiped his eyes, and sniffled. He pulled himself together enough to say, "Something that belongs to me," his voice shaking.

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Because of how much light the stone produced, Sören wrapped it in a handkerchief and carried it in his pocket on the way to the car. Sören kept it in his pocket inside the Audi as to not make it too bright for Anthony to drive safely, but even with the stone wrapped up and in Sören's pocket, it continued to throw off enough warmth that Anthony had to roll his window down a little to be comfortable.

They still struggled with words on the ride back. Sören confirming the stone was his, confirmed Anthony's dreams were real. Anthony wondered now if that meant *all* his dreams were real - dreams of swans, and ships like swans. Dreams of hunting down fire demons and slaying them to avenge Sören, only to be slain himself. He didn't like this at all. The world was not supposed to work this way...

Anthony took some deep breaths to calm down. He thought about telling Sören he'd dreamt of the stone - he'd dreamt about a set of three stones, all like that - but he decided that probably even by Sören's standards of crazy, that sounded *absolutely fucking daft*. So he held his peace.

He also couldn't help indulging his inner skeptic, who was screaming*this isn't real, this can't be real*, not wanting what all of this implied. He broke the silence with a question. "Sören, when you say it belongs to you, you... it's not... this isn't an Aboriginal artifact, you don't think? Maybe we should go back and put it back -"

Sören gave him a murderous look that would have been sexy if Anthony didn't feel the accompanying blast of rage, both at the notion that it wasn't his and should be put back, and that he would even steal something from Aboriginal lands, another simmering layer of rage at what had been done to his cousin's people. Sören's fists clenched and he shook his head vehemently. "That. Is. Mine." Then he got a hold of himself and said more gently - but firmly - "It's a long story how I know, but basically... it followed me here, to Australia."

"It. Followed. You here." Anthony raised an eyebrow. "I'm afraid I don't get it."*Or rather I do, but I don't want to.*

"Like I said, it's a long story."

"I've got time."

"I..." Sören closed his eyes and exhaled sharply. He started to cry again, this time shaking with silent tears. "I can't right now. I'm already... already wrecked enough that I found this, and what it means, and..." Sören opened his eyes and looked at Anthony with tears spilling down his cheeks. "Can we take a rain check on tonight? I know you were looking

forward to it and so was I, but I... I can't tonight. I have to get home and..." Sören couldn't finish the sentence, but broadcast *show this to Nico and Kàno.*

Anthony had no idea who this Kàno person was - he had a feeling it was Marcus's real name - but there was a familiarity there with the name that he didn't like, another feeling of *I've known this before*.

"All right." Anthony was disappointed by them canceling plans to sleep together for the first time - he was still horny, dammit - but he knew Sören was even more shaken up by this than he was, and needed time to recover. "We *are* going to have a talk about this stone. Soon." *Like tomorrow.* Anthony felt like he was going to climb the walls if they kept putting it off.

"Jæja." Sören sounded as reluctant to be pressed about the true nature of the stone, as Anthony felt reluctant to acknowledge his dreams were real and that his sense of reality was about to get blown open. Again.

Chapter 34

We need to talk.

Sören groaned and rubbed his face, using the Force to set his phone down on the bedtable before he sat up, bleary-eyed.

After coming home with the third Silmaril and showing Dooku and Maglor, the three of them had gotten very emotional. Sören hadn't slept much; the three of them held each other and took turns crying, or cried together. Relief at finding the Silmaril. Regret at the way their family had been torn apart. Rage at what had been stolen from them... and a punishment more severe than any crimes they'd committed. There were too many feelings, and Sören was exhausted, and now here was round two, with Anthony texting him first thing in the morning - Anthony knew he hated mornings.

Sören couldn't blame him for being curious, being concerned. *He* knew who and what Anthony was - he once again felt like an idiot that he hadn't figured it out months ago - but that didn't mean Anthony had figured it out; Sören didn't know what, if anything, he remembered, and even if Anthony remembered things it didn't mean he had the context as to what the very shiny stone was that came out of the mists yesterday. Sören knew that to an outside observer, or at least one without context, what happened with the stone was very strange indeed. Anthony had questions, and it was, indeed, his job to know things about supernatural or paranormal activity that might disrupt business-as-usual in society and create unrest. If the public at large accidentally saw something like the Silmaril, that could potentially be just as bad if not worse than accidentally seeing Sören or someone else use the Force in public, or accidentally seeing Maglor unglamoured. Sören resented having to keep everything so contained but at the same time he knew most people could not handle the truth; Sören thought Anthony's father was admirable for being a "normal" person with a Force-sensitive wife and son and not making a big deal about it.

Sören sighed, pinched his nose, and then used the Force to bring his phone back over. He played dumb as he typed back a response. *About?*

Less than a minute later, Anthony sent a reply. *You know what.*

Sören glared at his phone, hoping Anthony would feel it and back off for at least another day or two - the conversation about the Silmaril was going to be awkward and he felt like he'd had enough raw emotion for awhile. But of course, Anthony wasn't backing down. After Sören changed and fed his children, there was another text from Anthony.

Can you get someone to watch your kids for a bit? I think we should talk somewhere in private.

Sören exhaled sharply. Before he could even ask Dooku, he already knew. "If that's Anthony, you needn't worry about who will watch the children while you and he discuss things, I'm here," Dooku said.

Sören kissed his cheek. "*Takk,* you're a lifesaver."

Dooku gave him a little peck in return. "I know you and he need to talk about the Silmaril."

"Jæja." Sören had no idea how to even have that conversation, without bringing up all of the other things he was reluctant to get into - including and especially the subject of Anthony's past life.

Sören typed back a text. *I'll get ready, if you want to pick me up.*

Thanks, see you soon.

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Sören decided that if they were talking about the Silmaril, he was going to bring the Silmaril with him, in case Anthony needed some sort of evidence that he hadn't hallucinated yesterday. Then Sören thought if he was bringing one, he might as well bring all three, so he had the box with the three Silmarils on it as he waited for Anthony in the carport. Sören realized as he sat there with the Silmarils that now that he had all three, he was uncomfortable leaving them at home when he went out, especially if nobody else was going to be at home, and this was true even if he kept the box locked up in the safe where the guns were kept. Sören bitterly thought of Morgoth breaking into Formenos, killing Finwë and stealing the Silmarils while Fëanor and Fingolfin reconciled. He still considered Morgoth a threat - one iteration of him had died along with an entire universe, wherever the Dagor Dagorath had taken place, but as Loki had said, it was one head of a hydra and there were still other iterations of Morgoth out there. It wasn't just Morgoth that Sören had concerns about, but other enemies of theirs, and even the possibility of mundane, "normal" human robbers breaking in and stealing their valuables, the Silmarils among them.

Of course, fashioning the Silmarils into a piece of jewelry and wearing it outside the house was too ostentatious, especially when he was supposed to be keeping a low profile in Sydney.

Fuck.

Sören and Anthony were silent on the way to Anthony's flat. Every step up the stairs felt leaden, and when Anthony opened the door and Sören walked in, not even the sight of Craig happy to see him and coming over for love, could lift his spirits. Sören swallowed hard as he took a seat on the couch.

Anthony sat in the armchair. He folded his hands between his knees, gave Sören an expectant look, then looked down and exhaled sharply. "Right," he said. His eyes locked with Sören's. "So you said yesterday the stone belongs to you and it... followed you to Australia."

"Correct." Sören pursed his lips.

Anthony leaned back in his chair and steepled his hands on his lap. "Sören, I'm not saying this as your friend and... well, more than that, now... I'm saying this on behalf of MI6 and if it negatively affects our budding relationship so be it, but I have to do what I have to do. *I have to know what that stone is*, and why *you* have it. It throws off a lot of light and heat, like... a power source. Just the *sight* of it is such that your average, everyday person is not going to be able to look at it without having some kind of strong reaction. And if it were stolen, and it is indeed some sort of... energy... or a new element or something of the like, that could be very, very bad in the wrong hands, like North Korea or Iran, hell I wouldn't even trust the Americans with it, what with that madman Trump in power -"

Sören knew he was speaking in his capacity as an MI6 agent, but nonetheless he found Anthony's concern about the stone being stolen somewhat encouraging, even as he was annoyed that they had to have this conversation at all. *It's like he remembers, or at least subconsciously he knows what happened before, with the Silmarils being stolen.* "Jæja, believe me, the possibility of it getting stolen has crossed my mind too." *Wherever you are... fuck you, jail crow.*

"Yes." Anthony nodded. "I hope you don't get the impression I'm not on your side. I still want to help you, I still want to protect you. But as I keep telling you, I can't help you if I don't know what's going on. And in this particular case, I don't know what's going on with *that*, but I have a hunch it ties into the other things you haven't been wanting to tell me. I've let you put it off this long, but now... I need to know."

Sören frowned. He thought for a minute, trying to figure out how to proceed - how not to make things explode even more. He decided to answer Anthony's questioning with a question. "You say you're on my side, but I have to ask... have you told MI6 about the stone?" If they knew, Sören was never going to feel safe again, feeling it would be a matter of time before they tried to take it from him.

"Not yet," Anthony said.

Sören shot him a look, not liking the implication that Anthony might eventually tell them.

"Look," Anthony said. "My job *requires* me to report things *like that* to them right away. I'm already putting my arse on the line here for you, if somebody else finds out about the stone and it causes some kind of incident, one that would make your neighbors spotting you using the Force in Akureyri out to look like no big deal, and MI6 finds out I knew -"

Sören put up a hand. He huffed. He didn't like this, but he at least appreciated that Anthony had enough loyalty to him that he was waiting before contacting MI6 about the find. "So you're... not going to tell them?"

"Not necessarily. It depends on what you tell me, and what I assess from the information regarding the security risk. For the record, I really *don't* want to have to tell them. I get the sense that whatever the stone is, it is of deep personal significance to you, and I don't want to put you in a position where they might force you to give it up. But that means I need the full, unadulterated truth about what that is, and why you have it, because *yet again*, I can't help you if I don't know what's going on, and if I don't feel I have sufficient information to determine whether or not I can help you on my own, you're going to give me no choice but to get MI6 involved. You don't want that, and whether you believe me or not, neither do I."

"I believe you." Sören knew deep down that Anthony probably knew subconsciously what it was, and that it had not been a coincidence Sören found it in front of him - the Silmarils had been made as an expression of the love he and his brothers shared, after all.

"OK. So... what is that, Sören?"

Sören took a deep breath. "Something I made."

Anthony kept his expression neutral - though Anthony was also more tightly shielded than usual, Sören could feel he was trying very hard not to react, and keep a poker face - but then he blinked slowly, and his eyes widened somewhat. "When you say 'made'..." Anthony cocked his head to one side. He folded his arms, a look of slight disapproval on

his face, and Sören could hear the broadcast *here we fucking go* before Anthony's shielding clamped down again. "Sören, I have a dossier on you. A rather lengthy one. That I've read multiple times, that I've *studied* since 2019 when we picked you up as part of our protection program, back when Letitia was the one handling you. I know that you have a long history as a painter, and that you took ceramics for awhile when you were living in London. And more recently, you've got into forging. But... you never took glassworking, or any kind of training as a lapidary."

"No, I haven't."

"But you... made this."

Sören nodded solemnly. "I swear to you, I made that stone."

"I don't get it. *When* did you make that?"

"A long time ago."

"When you were living in *Iceland*?"

"No."

Anthony's brow was furrowed, and the expression of utter confusion on his face was so comical that Sören stifled a laugh. It was even harder as Sören's mind's eye played the meme GIF of a woman looking befuddled as math equations appeared before her, and Sören's mind turned the woman's face to Anthony's.

"Don't you bloody laugh at me," Anthony said, scowling.

Sören bit his lower lip, trying even harder to contain his amusement. He made himself sober up by remembering the gravity of this situation - it was no laughing matter that Anthony wanted information or he was going to contact MI6 about the Silmaril. Sören immediately straightened his face and his posture.

Then Anthony's eyebrows shot up, like he'd just been hit with a clue, and Sören braced himself, wondering if Anthony was going to mention he'd had memories or dreams of the stone - he was hoping Anthony would, as that would make the discussion much easier. But instead Anthony said, "Sören. Your... brother's... work. Dag's theories of alternate universes and aliens making contact with humanity, and what we know about the gates... you're some sort of time traveler, aren't you? Or you've journeyed to another universe? Are you here *from* another universe, did you use Marcus's previous handlers to forge a paper trail -"

"Oh god." Sören felt exasperated - he knew that was an absolutely*brilliant* conclusion, but it was also absolutely the wrong one, and Sören fought the urge to take Anthony and start shaking him, screaming *DO YOU KNOW WHO YOU ARE? DON'T YOU REMEMBER WHO I AM?*

"Is that how you got caught up with immortals, and beings presenting themselves to humanity as gods? Is that why you know we all died in another universe in October? Is -"

"No," Sören said. Then he added, "Mostly not."

"Sören. *Don't lie to me.*" Anthony's face was stern, his baritone even more commanding than usual. "I told you, I need the truth. I know this all sounds daft, and I know it's scary to

think about MI6 wanting more information out of you if you are, but..."

"I'm not here from another time or another world, at least, not in the way you're thinking of. And I did make that stone, myself."

"You did make it?" Anthony looked confused again. "Because if you say 'a long time ago', and you're not a time traveler, you haven't traveled through other universes, you're not from another universe originally, and I have no record of you taking glassmaking or training as a lapidary... you didn't just find it, and are claiming to be its maker because you don't want it taken from you?"

Sören felt ready to throw the box of Silmarils at him. He knew Anthony wasn't trying to be offensive, but he still felt that surge of anger at the insinuation that he was claiming to make something he hadn't, he'd just found, or taken wrongfully. He stood up with the box of Silmarils and walked to the kitchen, the act of moving a safe distance away lowering the urge to throw it. Then Sören growled, "Look, you motherfucker," and opened the box.

Light flooded the entire kitchen and living room. The stones floated out of the box, blindingly bright, casting thousands of rainbows on the ceiling and walls. Through the fog of white light Anthony's jaw dropped, noticing there was not one stone, but three. Anthony rose from the couch and walked slowly to the kitchen counter where the box sat, and the Silmarils were floating above the box, as if he needed to come closer to believe what he was looking at.

Sören's eyes met Anthony's. "Don't look. *See.*"

"...What?"

"And don't see just with your eyes." Sören put a hand on his heart. "See with your heart. *Feel.* A piece of my soul is in each of those stones."

"I..." Anthony was shaking, his face registering something almost like fear, as if part of him *knew* what the stones were, what it all was, what it meant.

Sören reached out to him, to touch his face, not wanting him to be afraid. Then the name came out before he could stop himself. "Ara..."

Anthony grabbed Sören's wrists, his grip vise-tight, his eyes wild, feverish. "*What did you just call me?*"

Sören felt a frisson through him, cock stirring at Anthony's lock on his wrists, excited by the rough handling. But he knew that the slip had startled Anthony, and this wasn't the time to say "hey, you were Finarfin in a past life". Sören used the sexually charged moment to play it off with some humor. "Oh, have you ever seen anime where someone says *ara, ara* because they're down to fuck?" Sören bit his lower lip. "Ara, ara, doki-doki?"

"No," Anthony said, shaking his head. "That's not the context, and you know it. That word. Why did you use that word, that name?"

Sören wondered what, if anything, Anthony knew - he didn't think Anthony could have figured out specifically he was Finarfin without help, or he would have also recognized the Silmarils for what they were and said *you're Fëanor*. Sören found it hard to believe Anthony didn't know anything about it at all, but telling someone about a past life was delicate - it was going to be hard enough to explain his, let alone Anthony's.

Anthony wasn't going to let it go unless Sören did something drastic. Sören knew just the thing. He leaned in and gave Anthony a kiss.

Anthony slammed Sören up against the refrigerator, kissing him back hungrily, all the tension between them exploding into passion. Sören's arms were raised now, Anthony's hands still gripping his wrists, and Sören was hard in his jeans, feeling Anthony's hardness against his own. They groaned into the kiss, tongues lashing together like they were trying to fuck each other with their mouths. Sören *wanted*. He didn't care if now was the wrong time or not, when the truth of the Silmarils - of everything - hadn't been revealed yet; now was the only time. There was nothing else that mattered right here, right now, but their desire.

Anthony sucked on Sören's lower lip and then he claimed Sören's mouth, their tongues even more insistent than before, urgent and teasing both at once, Sören feeling almost ready to come right then. Sören moaned as Anthony's tongue licked down his neck and then Anthony was kissing his neck, so deliciously sensitive. A shiver went through Sören and his hips instinctively bucked against Anthony's, cock aching for release.

"Fuck, I want you," Anthony rasped, before kissing Sören's neck some more.

Sören used the Force to drop the Silmarils back in their box and put the lid on, not wanting any neighbors to see an intensely bright light through the window and wonder what was going on. Then Sören used the Force to undo the button and zipper of Anthony's jeans, tug them down, and Anthony's boxer-briefs too. Anthony laughed when he realized what Sören was doing, and his grip tightened on Sören's wrists even more, hurting a little, but so good - Sören gasped and moaned again at that feeling of surrender, knowing Anthony could probably kill him with his bare hands but it was safe to lose control...

...safe to trust his brother.

Their mouths met again, needy and wanting, and now Anthony let go of Sören's wrists and reached down to undo Sören's own jeans. They stepped out of their shoes, their jeans and boxer-briefs pooled to the floor, and their freed hard cocks began to rub together as they kissed again and again, and Sören let out a little whimper into the fierce, hot kisses at the feel of Anthony's cock against his, another when Anthony's hands slid over his chest, thumb lingering to rub a pierced nipple through the fabric of Sören's shirt.

Sören couldn't take it anymore, he'd been aching for this for *months*. Sören pulled back from the kiss and dropped to his knees. He looked up at Anthony as his lips wrapped around Anthony's cock, taking it into his mouth inch by inch. Anthony groaned, and watched Sören, lips parted, breathing harder, green eyes feral as Sören's lips moved up and down on his cock, Sören reaching a hand to cup and rub his balls. Sören started to make lewd slurping sounds as he sucked, another shiver going through him at the sound of Anthony's growl. Sören sucked faster, harder, wanting to show Anthony how hungry he was for it, how much he loved this now that the moment was here, so worth the wait.

Sören took Anthony's cock out of his mouth and lapped at the head - Anthony was already leaking precum, and Sören chased the little streams with his tongue, savoring the lightly sweet-tart taste. His tongue swirled around and around the head, and playfully rubbed against the frenulum. Anthony shuddered and gave a deep, primal grunt before he ground out, "*Sören*. Oh god, Sören, *fuck*."

"Mmmm, you like that, *elskan*?" Sören licked down the shaft, down to Anthony's balls, licked and sucked at them, and then licked back up the shaft to the head. He drew the

head into his mouth to suck on it a little before taking it out and whispering, "I do." Then he took the head back into his mouth and focused on that, rubbing his tongue as he sucked, hand sliding up and down the shaft.

"Fuck." Anthony grabbed a fistful of Sören's curls. Sören liked that even more, his own cock pulsing, hole twitching, loving that feeling of being dominated... just like Fëanor had loved his baby brother showing him who was *really* in charge once Finarfin had grown.

Sören gave Anthony's cock a few more teasing licks, then took it down deeper, harder, bobbing his head, devouring. The look in Anthony's eyes and the way his breath hitched was as erotic to Sören as the luscious cock filling his mouth. As badly as Sören needed to come, this was an act of worship, this was creating a work of art, Anthony's pleasure beautiful to him. It felt so deliciously, shamelessly wanton to be on his knees on Anthony's kitchen floor, sucking him like this.

Anthony tugged on Sören's curls, and his free hand reached for the collar of Sören's shirt, starting to pull him up. Sören rose up and Anthony kissed him roughly, driving Sören even wilder. Anthony grabbed Sören's hair again and now he was marching Sören towards the bedroom holding onto Sören's hair, kissing him all the way down the hall. As soon as they stepped into Anthony's bedroom, Anthony pulled back just long enough for them to take their shirts off. When they were completely naked, Anthony's hands slid down and back up Sören's naked body, his hands trembling a little, breath caught.

"You're lovely," Anthony husked.

"You're fucking hot," Sören said, admiring Anthony, who was even more glorious than Sören had fantasized about. His lean, wiry body was well-sculpted - Anthony still had a six-pack from his time in the service, and nice definition in his arms without being too bulky. Anthony had a light pelt of black hair on his chest leading down to that treasure trail, a thick dark bush, and very hairy thighs and legs like a satyr; Anthony's chest wasn't as furry as Dooku's, but his legs were *much* hairier. Sören licked his lips, wanting to lick Anthony all over, rub his nose in the fur, rub his cock against it. The thought of Anthony and Dooku naked together, enjoying each other's bodies, white pelt against dark pelt, almost undid Sören - he couldn't wait for them to have a threesome sometime. In the meantime...

"Turn around," Anthony said.

Sören did, giving Anthony a view of his back and ass, wiggling his ass at Anthony. Anthony's fingers lovingly traced over the tattoo on Sören's back, and brushed down his spine, teasing him, making Sören shiver. Then he slapped Sören's ass, making Sören cry out, hole twitching, wanting that big cock inside. Anthony grabbed Sören's hips, walked him over to the bed, and pushed Sören down, bending him over the bed. Anthony slapped Sören's ass again - Sören moaned, feeling precum gush down his cock - and Sören heard the sound of a drawer opening. Sören looked at the dresser across from the bed and saw a vase with a dozen red roses and baby's breath sitting on it.

"That was for you," Anthony said, observing Sören noticing. "I was... going to be more gentle last night."

Sören laughed, delighted.

"But not now." Anthony slapped Sören's ass again, and Sören moaned, thrusting his ass out at Anthony, wanting him to *fucking take it*.

Sören knew why Anthony had opened a drawer as he felt liquid pour into the crack of his ass and drip down to his hole. Sören gasped and grabbed the sheets, whimpering, as Anthony rubbed his hard cock in the crack of Sören's ass. Then Anthony pulled back and Sören heard a slick sound that he knew was Anthony preparing his own cock. "Oh god..." Sören gave another whimper.

Anthony guided the tip of his cock to Sören's opening and just let it rest there, then began rubbing it around the rim, not entering yet, just teasing. "You want this inside you, do you?"

"God, *please.*" Sören looked over his shoulder, and whimpered again at the magnificent sight of Anthony naked, standing behind him. Sören wiggled his ass at Anthony some more. "FUCK ME. Fuck me *now* -"

Anthony pushed inside and Sören's breath hitched as he was stretched. When Anthony bottomed out in him they both moaned together, and tears of relief came to Sören's eyes... tears of joy. They'd both been needing this so badly, and now it was here and felt incredibly right. Sören felt like the last missing piece of the puzzle of his life had fallen into place, and somehow, it would all work out.

Anthony slapped Sören's ass again and then he began to thrust, showing no mercy, hips slapping against Sören's. Sören whined and panted as Anthony's cock slammed into him, hitting that sweet spot over and over, building the pleasure higher and higher, ready to shatter, but needing to stay lost in their rhythm, lost in their fuck, lost in their heat, the stroking inside him so, so good, the feeling of hot, needy lust consuming him. Sören loved being fucked hard like this, loving it even more when Anthony's right hand grabbed a fistful of Sören's curls again, Anthony's left hand playing with Sören's cock. The rubbing inside him and around him sent Sören to that edge and he gripped the sheets tighter, making desperate little noises through clenched teeth, almost sobbing with how delicious it felt. Sören rocked his hips back at Anthony, their hips slapping together even louder, Sören fucking Anthony's cock right back. When Sören started to work his ass in a circular motion he heard Anthony make a strangled noise and knew Anthony was close to losing it too. Anthony's hand tightened around Sören's cock, working it harder, faster.

"I want you," Anthony growled. "I *fucking* want you..."

"I need you," Sören breathed. "I need this so bad, oh god, I've needed this so fucking much..."

Anthony gave a deep groan. He let go of Sören's curls for a moment to slap Sören's ass, then his hand grabbed Sören's curls, tighter. Anthony's other hand continued to pleasure Sören's cock, and when Anthony's thumb began to rub Sören's frenulum, Sören braced himself, closer and closer and closer.

"Like that," Sören panted, and let out a whimper as the rhythm inside him and on his cock built to fever pitch. "Oh god, like that, right there..."

"Sören." Anthony moaned softly. "Sören..."

Closer. Sören shook, feeling himself rush to that point of no return. "Oh god,*don't stop!*" Sören let out a little cry and started to gasp for breath as he felt himself fly off that edge, burning bright. "Anthony, oh fuck, Anthony, I'm coming..."

A few thrusts later Anthony doubled over, shuddering against Sören as he gave a hoarse grunt. Sören moaned again at the feeling of Anthony shooting inside him, claiming him,

making him contract again, the ecstasy so delicious it almost hurt.

Anthony was leaning on Sören's back now; he had let go of Sören's cock and hair. He kissed Sören's neck and shoulder, and Sören turned his head so they could kiss. Then they both laughed together and Anthony's arms reached out so he could take Sören's hands in his, squeezing.

A moment later Anthony got up. Sören crawled onto the bed, and scooted over to one side. Anthony climbed onto the bed and took Sören in his arms. For a moment they just lay there, their hearts still thundering, their legs twined together, holding each other, catching their breath; Sören was dazed, barely able to believe what they had just done, and how *good* it was.

"You throw an amazing fuck," Sören said, touching Anthony's cheek.

Anthony's face lit up in a big, boyish grin as he laughed, and that made Sören grin too - he thought Anthony had a gorgeous smile. Then Anthony gave him a smaller smile - a little shy - as he kissed the tip of Sören's nose. "I hope I wasn't too rough with you."

Sören gave him a look. "No, I fucking *loved* it. I don't think my ass can take being pounded like that every single time, immortal or not, but you can tear my ass up like that at least semi-regularly and I'll have no complaints."

Anthony kissed the tip of Sören's nose again and then he drew Sören against his chest and pet his curls. Sören listened to the sound of Anthony's heartbeat as his own slowed, savoring the moment of peace after the violent storm of their passion.

But of course, that storm had been caused by a storm of another kind, and they'd only managed to delay it, not put it off completely. "Sören," Anthony said in a singsong voice, "you're still not off the hook for telling me about those stones." He booped Sören's nose.

Sören exhaled sharply. "Jæja. Look..." Sören rubbed his curls, then his beard, and leaned up so he could look Anthony in the eye. "I don't know how to explain to you how I made the stones, when I made the stones, without getting into the weirdest of all the weirdshit... and, ah... it's better if I show you rather than tell you." Sören thought of the palantir, but he also thought of Maglor - Maglor unglamouring himself would be some sort of hard proof of any claims he could make that Elves were real.

"Show me... how."

"You'll have to come back to my place, and... just trust me, that you'll get some answers about that."

"Sören, I don't think you understand how severe of a risk I'm taking here. It's all fine and good to tell me I'll get 'some' answers. I need more than 'some'. Every minute that goes by that there's a question about what those stones are, is a minute where they might be seen by the wrong person, or stolen, or... maybe they might explode -"

"I doubt that." Though a shiver went through Sören, knowing that they *had* exploded in another universe, at the Dagorath, and that universe had been destroyed as a result, like a reverse Big Bang.

"You don't, but my job has taught me *I* have to even if nobody else does." Anthony's face was stern again, all business. "I really need to know what the hell I'm looking at. You forget who and what you're dealing with. I have seen *some very strange things* in my job

with the department."

No Arafinwë, I haven't forgotten who and what I'm dealing with at all. Finarfin had always been the most rational one of the three brothers, the one to think before acting, sometimes to the point of overthinking, which had not infrequently exasperated the hot-headed Fëanor. Sören swallowed hard, feeling like he was navigating a minefield, feeling like discussing any sort of reincarnation business without the hard proof of the palantir or an unglamoured Maglor, or both, would blow everything up. Sören thought hard, and then a temporary solution came to him. "OK. I think... you're asking the wrong questions here. You're asking me how I made the stones and when, what they are, and I'm telling you that I need to be able to show you... later. Today. I promise. But not right this minute. I *can* give you some other information. You said, earlier, that you're holding off on telling MI6 until you're sure of the risk involved and what kind of safety protocols would be needed. I made those stones, I can tell you - they are magical artifacts rather than something like energy sources. They *can* be bad in the hands of the wrong person... if the wrong person knows how to use them. I wouldn't want them falling into the hands of thieves or a government - same thing, right - for personal reasons, but they wouldn't be able to use them like a nuke." *The Valar, on the other hand...* Sören's jaw clenched.

"Magical... artifacts."

That was the wrong word to use with the skeptical, atheist Anthony. Sören took a deep breath, sympathizing. "Like programming something, but with your mind, with the Force."

Anthony furrowed his brow - Sören knew he was still uncomfortable with that - but then he paused, and said, "So they probably couldn't be weaponized by hostiles like North Korea, or the Americans if Trump wants to wave his dick around, or..."

"Probably not."

"But they could be weaponized by *somebody*. Perhaps somebody more dangerous, but not officially on the books as a threat." Anthony raised an eyebrow, his gaze penetrating; Sören could practically see the wheels spinning in his head. "You told me awhile back that Ingmar Borovkov was... worshiped by humans as a god at one time, the Norse god Freyr."

"Correct. He's not human. Neither was his companion, who was known as Flóki Leifursson, posing as a Faroe Islander. He was -"

"The Norse god Loki."

Sören nodded solemnly.

"And you're not exactly on the best of terms with these two blokes."

"I don't know that I would go as far as to call them enemies. Ingmar was the one to make me immortal. He could have killed me instead of just leaving - I did put him through a glass door - but he didn't. It's Odin who I have the problem with, and they offered to help me stand a chance against him. I assume they're still technically on my side, even if it's only to serve their own interests - Loki made an oath to him under duress and wants out, he basically traded one bad boss for another, I guess you could say, and Ingmar, Freyr, has an old grudge with him."

"So you're... on Odin's shit list." Anthony's lips quirked. "How did you even manage to piss off a Norse god?"

"Existing?" Sören gave a nervous laugh. "*That* ties into what I told you about... needing to show, rather than tell. It's... an ancient conflict that started before I was born."

"And you're seriously not a time traveler? You can tell me, you know. I'm not going to judge -"

"Anthony, no. I *would* tell you something like that, but I'm not. I know it's hard to believe that in 2021 I have real problems with a god my very distant ancestors worshiped, and to hear me tell you I made the stones a long time ago and not assume it's because of time travel or alternate dimensions. But it's not. It would, in some ways, be easier on me if it was, because then it would be past history or *somewhere else* rather than danger always lurking around the corner." Sören exhaled sharply. "His people, the Aesir, were responsible for Dag's disappearance somehow. It doesn't mean they have him - it's far more likely some government or terrorist cell has him on ice somewhere..." *Or that he's dead.* "But they were involved. You know how you can sometimes see things in the Force? That's how I know. And it's not an isolated incident. You've seen from my dossier both of my parents were dead before thirty. My father didn't have a stroke, my mother's brain aneurysm wasn't natural causes. That was Odin. I found my father's diary about a year after we'd been living in the place in Akureyri, he wrote *allllll* about being harassed by Odin -"

"And you know this was true and not just... god, I hate saying this... mental illness. He wasn't schizophrenic...?"

"*No.*" Sören knew it was Anthony's job to ask questions like this, but he still found himself bristling. He resisted the urge to get up and start putting his clothes on, not wanting to be angry with Anthony for this. *This* was why he was going to need proof; Sören was sure that for every legitimate case of paranormal activity that MI6 had to deal with, they'd also probably had to investigate crackpots and frauds claiming miracles and godhood. *It's like the fucking X-Files in real life.* Sören felt like Mulder to Anthony's Scully. "There's other stuff that proves what I'm saying, starting with the fact that *Ingmar made me immortal*, and your department knows he's legit."

"And you showed up on his radar because of beef with Odin?"

"More or less, but it's a bit more complicated than that. Ingmar and... Marcus..." He didn't know why he was still using Maglor's alias, but then he didn't know if the name "Maglor" would be immediately recognizable as a fictional character or not and it was hard enough trying to explain this to Anthony without saying *we're the reincarnations of fictional characters.* If Anthony had to even ask if Sören's father was legitimately harassed by Odin or was just schizophrenic... Sören swallowed and went on, squirming a little with discomfort. "They also have an old history. They fought in a war together and they..." Sören didn't want to finish the sentence, not wanting to think about their past as lovers, even though he knew it very much was in the past.

"They fucked." Anthony finished the sentence for him.

Sören nodded. "Jæja. They went their separate ways, but Ingmar tracked him down a long time afterwards and... saw we'd been involved and Marcus had left, and conducted a scheme to get us back together. Including giving me and Nico immortality so Marcus wouldn't have to travel all alone."

Anthony sat, quietly considering, weighing Sören's words. Sören's heart beat a little faster, worried that Anthony was going to accuse him of lying, or of being delusional

himself, but finally Anthony nodded, like he accepted what Sören was telling him, at face value.

"So what you have to watch out for is gods, as far as those stones are concerned," Anthony said.

"I'm not sure Odin is after those stones in particular, but... a few other gods are," Sören said. "I expect trouble with them eventually, and you're better off not telling MI6 because it's the kind of trouble they won't be able to protect us from, even if they sent a small army. The best thing MI6 could do for us is stay out of our fucking way when we need to take a little vacation and settle it, and we're not ready for that."

"That assumes they would let you come to them, and not go to you. A small army may not be able to defeat gods, but neither can a few humans, immortal or not, Force-sensitive or not."

Sören shrugged. "Don't underestimate me." *Even though I myself doubt my own ability to handle it.* "Anyway, I'd rather hedge my bets on my family than on MI6. If you tell MI6 anything about the stones, it doesn't matter if you try to explain to them that they're magical artifacts and can't be used to make bombs or to produce power or fuel or any sort of mundane purpose. They're still going to want to take the stones from me and study them, you *know* this, and I can't allow that to happen. I'm telling you right now, I don't care what your body count is, how many people you've killed over the years. If *you* get in my way and try to take the stones away from me, ***I will kill you.*** I love you, ***I will still kill you.***" Sören bared his teeth, like a hungry wolf. He hated threatening somebody he loved, especially after what he'd been through with Justin Roberts, but if he lost the Silmarils again there was no hope for his family, he might as well go to the Valar on his knees and ask them to cast him into the Void for eternity.

Their eyes held. "You have my word I won't tell MI6," Anthony said. "And you may want MI6 to leave you alone and not interfere but... I still stand by my statement that *I want to help you*. Help you fight, help you guard the stones, help you get them back if they're stolen -"

Sören kissed him hard, overcome by emotion. Finarfin had never taken the Oath - Fëanor had made him go back to Valinor and pretend to repent for the sake of what was left of their bloodline, before the end - but this was almost as good as the Oath, and Sören was relieved and grateful that Anthony was showing loyalty instead of telling Sören he was being unreasonable about the Silmarils.

When they pulled back, catching their breath, Anthony grinned, like one wolf finding another, his mate, his hunting partner. "You're sexy when you're all aggro, you know."

"Oh really."

"Mhm." Anthony rolled over on top of Sören and pushed him back against the pillows, kissing him again, then kissing down Sören's neck, licking, nibbling. Sören moaned, his cock rising to life. He moaned louder as Anthony kissed and licked his way down Sören's chest, tongue teasing a nipple, then the other. "Your spirit is as fiery as those stones."

Sören narrowed his eyes - once again, that sounded like Background Finarfin talking, even if Anthony wasn't consciously aware of it - and then his eyes rolled and he cried out as Anthony kissed and licked at Sören's sensitive stomach, leaned over Sören's hard cock. Sören cried out as Anthony's lips wrapped around his cock, and all business was forgotten, transmuted to pleasure in Anthony's mouth.

Chapter 35

Sören's sweet brown eyes were the first thing Anthony saw as he stirred awake, woken by Sören raining kisses over his face. Then Anthony saw that smile and his heart melted. He reached up to touch Sören's face, and skritched Sören's beard like he was a cat, making Sören giggle. "Hey, Brown Eyes," Anthony said, his voice husky from sleep.

They'd taken a nap after a few rounds of mind-blowing sex - Anthony still could have used some more sleep, but it was getting later and Anthony remembered it was Sunday and he usually had dinner with Sören's family on Sundays. It felt surreal to be laying naked in his bed with Sören, knowing what they'd done, after so many months of pining and trying to avoid further entanglement. They had given into explosive passion that could not be denied, even as Anthony knew he'd just barely skimmed the surface of Sören's complications, and knew it was going to make his own complicated life even more complicated.

Starting with the fact that Anthony had dreamt of those three stones, as something Sören had made... a Sören who was long-haired, and clean-shaven, grey-eyed, but nonetheless him. And Anthony had dreamt of being called someone named "Ara", and Sören had let that name slip just before they fell on each other; Anthony had been too caught up in the heat of the moment to press it, but it was bothering him again. Sören had denied coming here from an alternate universe, which would have been the most logical and least problematic explanation for why Anthony had those dreams, if he was "tuning into" something happening to their counterparts in a parallel world. Instead, Sören had said "a long time ago". Anthony didn't like that at all.

But, he liked Sören. A lot. Too much. He realized that Sören had said "I love you" earlier - in the same breath as "I'll kill you", threatening him if he told MI6 about the stones; Anthony couldn't really blame him for that, he got the feeling those stones were more important than Sören was letting on, he didn't have the whole story about them after all - but still, there had been an "I love you" admission and Anthony hadn't said it back yet. Now was the time, as he leaned in and kissed the tip of Sören's nose.

"I love you," Anthony said softly.

They rubbed noses, before a sweet, lingering kiss. Anthony took Sören's hand and kissed it. He looked at the clock and groaned.

Sören patted him. "The food will be worth it. Nico is making ratatouille tonight."

"I still wish I could just stay in bed with you," Anthony said as he sat up.

Sören smiled again. Then Craig trotted in and began to meow.

"You heard the word 'food', didn't you," Anthony said, like Craig could understand what he was saying.

Craig meowed as if he did, in fact, understand what was being said.

After they got dressed, Anthony fed Craig, gave him some pettings, and Sören took the box of stones and Anthony grabbed his car keys and they were off.

"So..." Anthony felt a little apprehensive, promise of ratatouille or not. "You said I'm going to get 'some answers' tonight."

"They may not be the answers you want, they may not be answers you like, but they will be answers," Sören said, nodding.

"You can tell I'm weirded out by this entire thing."

Sören nodded again. He gave Anthony a sympathetic look. "I mean, I was weirded out too when everything started coming together. I've had about two years to get adjusted to the 'new normal' but it still... isn't easy to accept, or live with."

Anthony thought about telling Sören about his dreams, but he held off, wanting Sören to play his hand before he played his own. He didn't think Sören would manipulate him - he worried about being seen as a manipulator himself, some sort of fraud, if he discussed his dreams.

Anthony nonetheless tested the waters a little bit. "Thank you for this afternoon. It was... long overdue. Like we've been waiting for a thousand years."

"Or longer," Sören said.

Oh god. Anthony had a feeling Sören wasn't just saying that to say it, and that was exactly what he was afraid of. "I never used to believe in the concept of soulmates, and I still mostly don't, but it... felt right, what we did. Like it was meant to be. Like we were meant to find each other."

"I agree," Sören said.

Their eyes met, and held, and then Sören looked out the window at the setting sun. "Funny coincidence, how we just missed each other that day Nico and I used the portal to go to Qui-Gon's wake, and your Audi was on your way to your mother's house - if we'd stayed at your house five minutes longer, we would have met each other." Sören looked back at Anthony.

"That is indeed an interesting coincidence." Anthony's mouth was suddenly dry, feeling those little bells go off in his head again. "You said you used to live in London, for awhile? I know it's a big city, but I'm surprised our paths never crossed before then, especially as two gay men."

Sören nodded. He folded his arms and leaned back in his seat - Anthony sensed he didn't want to revisit that painful period of time in his life, but there it was. "Já. I came to London in May 2015."

"That's... another interesting coincidence. I had been stationed overseas and I came back to London in May 2015 - thought I was on shore leave, but that's when MI6 recruited me and I ended up staying for awhile." Anthony raised an eyebrow. "What day did you fly in, do you remember?"

"May fifteenth, 2015."

"To Heathrow?"

Sören nodded.

"Me too." Anthony's eyes narrowed. "What time did you get in?"

"Around two in the afternoon."

Anthony pulled over abruptly and took a few deep breaths - he'd been bracing himself for it and it still hit him hard anyway. Sören reached for the water bottle in the cup holder between them, and passed it to him, and for the briefest instant Anthony's hand was on his arm. Too hot. Their eyes met, and held, and then Anthony's hand left Sören's arm and he took the water bottle and drank. For a moment neither of them said anything, but nothing really needed to be said.

"Right," Anthony muttered. He pulled back out onto the road. "Well, that's... quite a set of coincidences, we flew into Heathrow on the same day, would have been in the baggage claim around the same time."

"I wonder what happened," Sören said. "What got in the way."

Anthony scowled. "I got bumped into as I was heading for the baggage claim. It would have been unremarkable on its own, but..."

"But what?" Sören's face registered alarm.

"This is what I mean when I've told you I've seen some really weird shit, even before I ended up working for MI6. So..." Anthony exhaled sharply, feeling like a madman, but the story had to be told. "I mentioned that I met your brother, a long time ago. He was visiting London on his summer off from school, and he was at Big Ben. I was just coming out of a pub when I saw this teenage kid being chatted up by an older guy. He wasn't, you know, *very* old, maybe mid-thirties if I had to guess. There was something about the guy that felt really off, I didn't know how to place it. Your brother was trying to get directions to the hotel, and the guy wanted to drive him there, and my hackles went right up, all the warning alarms went off in my head, like him going anywhere in the guy's car was a bad idea."

Sören's jaw dropped, and Anthony could feel it across their bond, Sören wondering if something, someone, had been planning to take Dag for years.

"Well anyway, this was back in 2001, and fourteen years later, I ran into the guy again, at the bloody airport. I'm absolutely sure it was him, he was quite distinctive-looking, and he hadn't aged a day as far as I could tell." A shiver went through Anthony.

"What did he... look like," Sören said, his face going from surprise to anger.

"Long white-blond hair to his waist. Very, very tall, with a face that was more pretty than handsome. He was wearing sunglasses in 2001 when I first encountered him, which wasn't unusual for outdoors on a sunny day, but he was wearing sunglasses inside the airport in 2015, which *is* unusual for indoors on an overcast day. He had the exact same ring on as that day in 2001, it looked like a fire opal, set in the body of a spider."

Sören shuddered, a look of revulsion on his face, and Anthony heard him broadcast:*The Dark Lord.* Anthony wondered what that was about.

"Our meeting was interfered with," Sören said. "That was... deliberate."

"You know the guy?"

"Yes and no," Sören said - another maddeningly cryptic answer. Anthony felt ready to scream. Then Sören reached out and put a hand on Anthony's knee, his touch warm and soothing. "It definitely seems like he wanted to keep us from finding each other. Like he knows there's... power... when we're together."

"Power." A frisson went down Anthony's spine. He knew it - he felt it - but he didn't understand it. Or at least, not consciously. He thought of the dream of those stones, shining like the love he and Dooku had for Sören, the love Sören had for them... light that was not just physical, but spiritual, like the stones encapsulated everything good and beautiful about the world and the experience of life, a powerful beacon against despair and hatred and evil.

Anthony held onto that thought as he drove into Sören's neighborhood. His heart beat a little faster as he got closer to the mansion... closer to the truth.

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As dinner cooked, Anthony played Team Fortress 2 with Sören, Ali, Kenny, and Marcus. Anthony was Spy, Sören was Pyro, Ali was Demo, Kenny was Soldier and Marcus was Sniper. While Anthony enjoyed himself, he nonetheless felt low-level anxiety during the game, feeling like he was waiting for a bomb to go off.

Just before dinner Sören went to the nursery to change his daughters and son, and Marcus followed him down, and though Anthony felt rude about eavesdropping he still strained to overhear what he could. Most of the conversation was muffled, but Anthony heard the word "glamour", and then later, Sören saying the name "Sauron" and Marcus's yell of "WHAT".

Anthony froze, his hair standing on end. He thought of Sören's broadcast in the car:*The Dark Lord*. His mind's eye replayed the image of the unusual ring on that stranger's hand, the impressive stone that nonetheless made him feel uneasy, like he was being *looked at*, though that had never made any sense, it was just a ring.

Sauron is a fictional chaacter. Just... no. Anthony's head was spinning.

Dinner was a perfectly pleasant, normal affair - too pleasant and too normal. Anthony's sense of dread and discomfort grew with every passing moment, though he tried to hide it. At last the meal was over, and when the dishes were done and the dishwasher started, everyone gathered in the living room, with Dooku serving after-dinner wine for those who wanted it.

"One glass, because I'm driving," Anthony said.

Dooku nodded as he poured.

Marcus started the conversation. "Anthony, Sören tells me that you saw the stones."

"I did," Anthony said. "They're... really something." He shifted awkwardly in his seat. "Beautiful doesn't seem like it does them justice. Nor magnificent. Nor any word I could use." Anthony challenged Marcus with his eyes. *Out with it, then.* "Sören tells me he made them 'a long time ago', but denies being a time traveler or here from another universe."

"He's not lying," Marcus said.

"I thought not, but... his statement makes no sense otherwise. I assume you know about the stones."

"I am... rather familiar with the subject, yes." Marcus frowned a little - Ali let out a snort - then his expression returned to neutral.

Anthony glanced over at Sören, then back at Marcus. His heart was racing again, feeling like this magical mystery tour ride was about to accelerate.

Marcus folded his hands in his lap. "Let me answer your question with a question. Are you familiar with the works of J.R.R. Tolkien?"

Anthony thought back to hearing Sören say the name "Sauron" in the nursery and Marcus's yell of "WHAT." Anthony didn't like this - Sauron was fictional, fiction was not reality... but he just nodded.

Marcus raised an eyebrow. "Define 'familiar' as you understand it. What of his have you read?"

"Ah... the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy. I've also seen the films. Actually, when I was newly in the service and had just been deployed after 9/11, Dag sent me a care package - I told Sören that I'd met Dag briefly in London in 2001, he was lost and I helped him safely find his hotel room. His care package included a nice hardbound copy of the trilogy, I still have it."

Sören's eyes misted at that but Sören kept calm. Anthony wanted to go over and hug him - he knew that Dag coming up more than once today had hit a sore spot for him, Sören missed his brother and Dag being taken was traumatic for him - but Anthony remained in his seat. "Why do you ask?" Anthony continued, having a feeling he already knew the answer and wasn't going to like it at all.

"So you've... only read *Lord of the Rings*. You haven't read *The Silmarillion.*"

"No, that's been on my to-do list for years but I've never gotten around to it." The pit of Anthony's stomach rose. "What... does Tolkien have to do with any of this."

Marcus took a deep breath. "The three stones you saw are the Silmarils, which were made by an Elf named Fëanor. When Sören says he made them a long time ago, he was... Fëanor in a past life."

Anthony couldn't believe what he was hearing. Or rather, he didn't want to. Another chill went through him. Those dreams he kept having were *memories* - he had been alive back then too, and reincarnation couldn't be real, even if the "gods" were real in the sense of one or more advanced species presenting themselves to humanity as gods.

"Several of us in this room are also reincarnated Eldar," Dooku said. "Myself included."

"That..." Anthony shook his head. "Reincarnation isn't real. Let's say for the sake of argument it is, at least occasionally. There's that and then there's... this. *Reincarnated fictional characters?* Have you lot been hanging out on Tumblr?"

"Even if MI6 had not forbidden us from doing so, I shan't use social media," Dooku said,

making a face. "Especially not sites that can't spell their own names correctly."

Sören snickered, but then he sobered up. "What we're telling you is true. I can't speak for everyone who's ever claimed to have a past life, as to whether or not there's any legitimacy, but as for us..."

"There are too many coincidences to truly be coincidental," Dooku said. "Memories we had in dreams and visions, independently of each other's influence. Then our paths crossed here and there, all coming together... against the odds."

"And those were some damn odds," Sören said. He gave Anthony a pleading look. "That little discussion we had about how we flew into Heathrow at the same time on the same day in 2015 and that same guy bumped into you who was being creepy around Dag in 2001? That... fits the bill for Sauron. When I tell you I've got powerful enemies, it isn't just Odin. Sauron and his buttbuddy Morgoth are out there, our business with them isn't finished."

"And there's the Doom of the Valar to punish us for our rebellion," Dooku said. "Like an abuser punishing an abuse victim for standing up to the abuse."

"Being incarnated as mortal wasn't a punishment in and of itself," Sören said, "or at least not for those of us in this room, I can't speak for all of the Eldar I know reborn as mortal... but a mortal incarnation makes us more vulnerable, the Valar basically drew blood and threw us to the wolves, like Odin."

"I..." Anthony couldn't even make words. Despite his original plan to have one glass of wine because he was driving home, he found himself reaching for the bottle of wine with the Force and pouring himself a second glass, gulping it down, and pouring a third. Dooku raised an eyebrow. After sitting with his wine for a moment, Anthony found another question to ask, though he was hoping it didn't come off as accepting everything at face value, because this all sounded *crazy*. "Are all of you Elves reborn as mortal, or..."

"Not all of us," Marcus said. "I am still as I once was. Ingmar Borovkov, who gave immortality to Sören and Nicolae, was known as Ingwion in canon. He left Aman for Middle-Earth and, apparently, became worshiped as a god. I could have likely done so myself, but I preferred to conceal who I was, I didn't think it was right to take advantage of people."

"And you are..."

"Known as Maglor," Marcus said. "The Sindarin version of Macalaurë, the name my mother gave me."

Suddenly the aliases made sense - Mark Lowry. Marcus Lauer. Even Alejandro Magalhães.

"You can take a few minutes to Google it," Marcus said. "I encourage you to do so, in fact."

Anthony took out his phone and did just that. It checked out - Marcus as a singer, as a musician and a harpist in particular. Anthony finished off his third glass of wine. He was about to pour a fourth and Dooku shook his head, using the Force to pour out the rest of the bottle for himself.

The version of reality that Anthony Hewlett-Johnson had come to accept for forty years

was shattering, and he clung to the last pieces he could. "You're a fictional character? Tolkien's work isn't fiction?"

"Ronald Tolkien and I fought together in World War I. I told him the history of my people. His work isn't completely accurate - I left some things out due to the sensibilities of the era, and also, he took some artistic liberties with it... and personal liberties. He too, was reincarnated from those days, he was known as Beren. His biases, especially against my family, colored his writing. I didn't make too much of a big deal about it because the most important parts of history were preserved and for the rest... it affords me a certain amount of protection if my truth is seen by others as fiction. I can move more freely in the world if people think Elves aren't real. Back in the days when humanity had more superstitions, it was a *lot* harder to be discrete. Even as humanity was moving away from that in the twentieth century I still felt it was better to reinforce the idea of Elves as something from imagination."

Anthony chewed on that information, but he still wasn't completely convinced, even though he'd had his own dreams and he couldn't sense falsehood or madness in anyone present in the room. This was just... too much. Finally Anthony said to Marcus - Maglor - "I know you're some kind of immortal, and the Americans had you for awhile in the 1970s and were studying you. But... an Elf? A fictional character? *Really.* You're not just taking the piss and grifting on these people? Or using that as your backstory to hide what you really are... what species you are, what planet you're from?"

Maglor rolled his eyes and gave Anthony a stern look - Anthony could sense irritation bristling at the accusation of lying. Anthony swallowed hard, knowing he'd just put his foot in it, but this was part of his job, they couldn't accept all claims of paranormal activity or non-human visitation without proof. Right now all he had was words... and his own dreams.

"The planet I'm from is this one, Earth... my people called it Arda a long time ago," Maglor said coolly. He glanced at Sören and Dooku, who both nodded - Anthony got the sense they'd communicated something telepathically. Dooku got up and turned off the light.

Before Anthony could ask what was going on, he watched Maglor light up like a living nightlight, glowing silver in the dim shadows of the room. He wasn't as bright as the stones - the Silmarils - but he was bright enough that it startled Anthony, made him feel a mixture of wonder and fear. As Anthony looked upon Maglor shining, he watched Maglor's hair grow from the middle of his back, all the way down to his thighs. The most startling of all was the way Maglor's eyes changed, from a bright grey to silver flashing blue and gold, like labradorite. Maglor tucked his hair behind his ears, revealing pointy tips, somewhat more graceful and elongated than the Vulcans and Romulans on *Star Trek*.

This wasn't the wine talking - Anthony had drank too much more than once in his life and never hallucinated. Anthony's mouth opened and he heard a high-pitched, strangled noise come out that he would have been embarrassed by if he could actually care about such things at the moment. He felt like his brain had been ripped open and turned inside out.

When Maglor spoke, it was like hearing several voices at once. "***Do you believe me now.***"

Anthony made another noise. His arms were gooseflesh. He felt tears well in his eyes, a completely irrational reaction, but he couldn't help it. He was shaking, too. He clapped a hand over his mouth and his free hand pointed, point-point-pointed, finger trembling. He was making hyena noises through his hand.

Kenny was the one to reach out and pat him first. "It's OK, man," Kenny said. "It's all right. We freaked out at first, too."

"Everyone does," Maglor said, his voice returning to normal, if a bit louder. "I can 'put it back' if you'd rather..."

That felt somewhat rude. Anthony took his hand away from his mouth, tried to get himself under control with a few deep breaths - he was still shaking like a leaf - and then he said, "This, right here and now, is your... your default state?"

Maglor nodded. "I use the Force to give the illusion of appearing more human, but this is how I am without that illusion in place."

That explained the word "glamour" in the nursery. Anthony took a few more deep breaths. "I... I don't want you to have to hide yourself for my comfort. It feels like you have to do that rather a lot, you should be able to be yourself in your own bloody home..."

"And yes, this is myself," Maglor said. "I have no reason to lie to you about what I am. It gains me nothing. I'm telling you about all of this to help *you*, because it seems like you have some very valid concerns about what Sören found yesterday." *And perhaps, you needed some guidance to get where you need to go.*

Anthony's jaw dropped again. He wondered if Maglor could sense the dreams, somehow; he wondered if Maglor thought he was "one of them". Anthony wondered it too, even as a small part of him was still resisting, not wanting this to be true, not wanting to deal with the whole bloody business of reincarnation and vengeful gods and old scores to settle...

A flood of words finally came to him. "All the time you were observed by the Americans... this was never on your file."

"No," Maglor said. "They did their best to try to get me to break and reveal what I really am, where I come from, but I wouldn't give them any information in that vein. They know I'm Force-sensitive, they know my constitution is much stronger than that of a human, they know that I'm not human, they know places I've traveled and what I did while I was there, but they don't know much else. You are the first government agent I've shared my true nature with and I trust you to keep it to yourself. The only reason why I'm trusting you is... well... I think you already know."

That more or less confirmed, without explicitly saying so, that Maglor did indeed think he was someone from the past. Another frisson went through Anthony. He thought about spilling the truth of his dreams then, but he found himself unable to make words once more. This was a lot. He needed to digest the bits he'd been given without adding more to the mix.

"Oh, Anthony, one more thing?" Dooku cocked his head to one side. "As you know, you've had a lot to drink; you shan't drive tonight. You may stay in one of the guest rooms."

Even if Anthony hadn't drank so much, he didn't think he was in a position to drive, after what he'd just seen. "Thanks," Anthony mumbled. "I... I think I'm going to go down there now, lay down for awhile."

"You OK?" Sören asked, all worried brown eyes.

"No," Anthony said. He gave a tight smile and stood up, feeling like his legs were about to

give out from under him as he headed down the hall.

Anthony just lay there for awhile, staring up at the ceiling. There was too much to process, and the answers he'd received gave him even more questions. He still didn't want to believe any of this was true.

He also felt a twinge of guilt - he'd fed Craig before he left, and though Craig had a drinking fountain and enough food to last overnight, he still felt guilty about leaving the cat alone by himself. Rasputin hopped up on the bed with a "Prrrp?" as if to say *I understand*. Anthony pet and skritched the cat, who kneaded him, and Rasputin's purr soothed him to sleep.

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He is fighting fiery demons alongside a man who looks very much like Maglor but also isn't Maglor - eyes like a blue flame instead of labradorite. Anthony knows as he swings his sword he may die, they killed Sören after all. That is why he is here. The men he loves the most are dead; he has nothing left to lose, living a half-life in a loveless marriage, groveling before the gods.

One of those fire demons looks like Flóki Leifursson - Loki - but with wings of flame, trails of smoke, eyes blazing orange instead of green, dressed like something out of *Mad Max*, wielding flaming whips. It is he who delivers the death blow. As Anthony lays there, he refuses to die quietly, using what last strength he has to curse the demon. Loki laughs at him. *Why so serious?*

Now everything is glowing silver, like the way Maglor does. It is a scene like something out of the *Lord of the Rings* movies but even more majestic than the screen could portray, a basin of water setting on a stone pillar carved to resemble a tree, a waterfall and stream a few meters away. A lady clad in white, a silver circlet around her head, with a flood of silver-gold hair to her knees, tucked behind her ears to reveal the points... piercing labradorite eyes like Maglor's. She doesn't look like Cate Blanchett - her face bears a striking resemblance to his mother when she was young. But it is unmistakably Galadriel.

Galadriel is at her basin now and everything glows even brighter, a haze of white light like the Silmarils produced, but not as intense. Her eyes meet his, and he knows she can see him. She reaches out a hand. *Father.*

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Anthony woke with a start, hearing himself cry out.

His heart was hammering in his ears, and his head hurt a little. He looked over at the clock - it was just after one AM.

He went to the bathroom, and when he was finished he washed his hands and splashed cold water on his face. He realized that he'd gone to bed in his clothes and hadn't asked for a change of pajamas, and hadn't brushed his teeth before bed either. There was a spare toothbrush in the bathroom, and Anthony brushed his teeth now, as much to ground himself in the present as for hygiene reasons.

But he was still shaken. The dream had been so intense, and now he was convinced he'd completely gone off the deep end. Presuming he was a reincarnated Tolkien character too - and he wasn't completely sold on that idea yet, it still bothered him - *he'd dreamt of Galadriel calling him "Father"*. That was daft even for what was happening here.

Anthony shivered.

As he went back to the guest room, he heard Ali's voice and Maglor's outside in the backyard, muffled. He paused, then found himself turning around and heading in the opposite direction, going down to the glass doors and they were standing outside talking as Huan did his business. Ali spotted him and made a "come out here" gesture. Anthony's heart started racing again as he slid open the door and stepped out.

"Hey," Ali said. "You doing OK?"

"No," Anthony said truthfully.

"Can't sleep?"

"Strange dreams." He immediately wished he hadn't said that.

"I bet," Maglor said under his breath, then he raised an eyebrow and asked, "Care to say what about?"

Anthony looked down and exhaled sharply. He didn't want to talk about the dreams he'd had a little while ago, or before that, but he felt like he was on trial and there was no evading the question. *If they're going to judge me, I might as well find that out now.*"Well, tonight they were about..." Anthony scratched his head and shifted his weight from one foot to the other, feeling awkward, not quite sure how to word it. "First I was, ah. Fighting a pack of fire demons with a sword. I was with someone who looked like you -" Anthony's eyes met Maglor's. "But wasn't, his eyes were blue. I was there to... avenge Sören."

Ali's mouth opened; Maglor's face betrayed no reaction, but Anthony could sense a sharp ache, like he'd hit a nerve.

"What else," Maglor said softly.

"I dreamt about Galadriel." Anthony gave a nervous, hysterical laugh. "She didn't quite look like she does in the movies - she looked more like a young, blonde version of my mum, actually, which was *strange* - but what was even stranger was she reached out to me and called me Father. I mean..." Anthony laughed again, feeling like he was losing his mind. "I know you say Sören and the others are reincarnated Elves, but I... I can't be..."

Ali and Maglor looked at each other, nodded, and Huan came trotting back over. Maglor picked up Huan's mess and threw it in the wastebasket outside - something about an ancient, immortal being cleaning up dog doo made Anthony laugh again - and he sobered up as they led him back inside, sitting in the living room.

Ali made tea, and when it was ready, she brought it over. "This calls for tea," she said simply.

Anthony braced himself again.

"Have you had any other dreams like the ones you had tonight?" Maglor asked.

Anthony nodded slowly. "I dreamt of the stones - the Silmarils - before, and that Sören made them. Saying he made them as a tribute of his love for me, and Nicolaas. Seeing them in reality, and Sören's claim to have made them... was unsettling."

"What else?"

"I used to dream of swans, starting when I was a young boy. Swans and a garden, an animal sanctuary with a bird menagerie... having two brothers. I used to think it was escapism, since I was an only child and I always wanted brothers, especially when I was getting bullied in public school, the idea of having two older brothers was comforting." Anthony felt sheepish about the next part. "I'm blond in those dreams."

There was a long pause, as if Maglor and Ali were both evaluating what they were being told. Anthony sipped at his tea, trying to take comfort in the familiar act of tea-drinking, but he felt like he was awaiting some sort of sentence.

Finally Maglor said, "I don't want to steer you and tell you who you are. But this is the point where I strongly urge you to read *The Silmarillion*."

"You... you think I'm someone from there -"

"I *know* who you are," Maglor said. "But I feel it would be better for you to read it for yourself and let that last piece fall into place on your own. I do, however, have something that will help." Maglor made a "wait here" gesture and then he got up and went upstairs.

While Anthony waited, he asked Ali the obvious. "You're somebody, too?"

"I'm Maedhros, Fëanor's eldest son." Ali's lips quirked. "Now it's like I'm his mum, but he needs that."

Anthony chuckled. "I take it that it wasn't easy for you to figure things out -"

Ali pursed her lips and shook her head. "No. I accept it as true, it explains a lot about the dreams I've had and my personality, but it's still *weird as fuck*. Weirder still to know that an entire pantheon of gods is pissed off at you and wants you to suffer as much as possible. I had it comparatively easy than some of the others, my mum arranged for a protection ritual when I was born. But I'm grownup now, and I'm not sure how much of that magic still holds. I worry a lot about the future, to be honest, and how the Doom is going to play out for me, and Kenny both."

"I'm sorry," Anthony said. That sounded trite, but he genuinely felt for them, even as part of him still resisted all of this and wasn't entirely convinced this was real, or at least, he didn't want it to be. He'd signed up to deal with weird shit when he got brought into MI6; this was beyond the pale.

Maglor came downstairs with a copy of *The Silmarillion* and a black-and-white cover composition book like the kind schoolchildren used. He handed them to Anthony.

"What's this?" Anthony asked, glancing at the notebook and then at Maglor as he took his seat.

"I told you that there are some things I left out when I told Ronald Tolkien the story of my people... there are some things he took artistic liberties with, or colored with his own personal bias as Beren reborn. In anticipation of having the talk with you, I started compiling a companion journal of notes - what parts are true, elaborating to give missing

context where applicable, and what parts are made up wholecloth or perhaps contain a grain of truth but were exaggerated. When you do your readthrough of *The Silmarillion*, it would be helpful to refer to those notes."

"All right," Anthony said. "Er, thank you."

After he finished his tea, Anthony retreated back to the guest room. He thought about reading through *The Silmarillion* right then and there, but he hesitated - while the wine had mostly worn off, he still didn't feel like he was in the proper place mentally to handle reading it, and Maglor's notes. He was also worried about falling even deeper down the rabbit hole, getting even more entangled. He knew he couldn't put it off indefinitely but he needed just a few more hours of what was left of "normalcy".

Anthony drifted in and out of half-sleep - he still needed to rest, but it was like his brain wouldn't let him completely go back to sleep lest he have more of those strange dreams. At last he felt Sören crawling on the bed beside him. He glanced at the clock and saw it was five-thirty in the morning, and gave Sören a look of surprise, knowing he wasn't a morning person.

"Baby woke me up," Sören explained.

"Ah." Anthony realized he should have known that, feeling sheepish.

Then Sören gave him a kiss, fingers playing down his chest. "Hey,*elskan.*" Sören kissed him again. "You want a good-morning blowjob?" Sören grinned and kissed the tip of his nose.

Ordinarily Anthony would say yes, but he sighed. Sören immediately sensed the reserve and pulled back, trying to keep his expression neutral, but his eyes were wounded.

"It's not you," Anthony said. "I feel like... this is too much. You know, everything that was discussed last night. I need some time to process everything."

"Oh," Sören said, his voice small. "OK."

Anthony knew that Sören was trying to be understanding but he could still feel the sting of rejection across their bond, that Sören was taking it personally even though it wasn't personal. Anthony didn't need this right now, and he quickly sat up. "I think..." Anthony hated this, but right now it felt like the only solution. "I think I need to take a few weeks and process everything."

"Oh."

"I'm sorry. It's just... it's a lot. I... I don't know how to deal with any of this. I feel like a wreck." Anthony rubbed his chin. "I need some time to figure this shit out on my own without being influenced or..."

"I get it," Sören said, but his tone was cold. Sören climbed off the bed and walked out without saying another word.

"Fuck," Anthony huffed. *Well, I blew that.*

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Anthony went home a short while later. Except, he didn't stay there.

He thought about calling MI6 and telling them he couldn't handle this assignment anymore, that it had become too personal. He knew, however, if he did that, they were going to give him another assignment somewhere else, and the odds were very good he would never see Sören again. Needing a break for a few weeks to process everything was not the same as needing to walk away from him permanently - even though a part of Anthony worried that his presence was in fact putting Sören in danger, if someone like the likes of Sauron had tried to keep them from meeting each other in 2015, Anthony didn't think Sauron would just let them finding each other go unnoticed.

Anthony needed a vacation. One did not, of course, simply tell MI6 they needed a vacation. Anthony was going to have to use some subterfuge with his own department, but he was in a position where he had some resources at his disposal to get away with it.

Anthony packed what he could fit in a single rolling suitcase, including his laptop and his hard drives, which contained sensitive information. He put Craig in a cat carrier. He made sure he had his own bank cards as well as the cards he used under assumed names, and his stash of emergency cash. He began to do the math in his head - Sydney was eleven hours ahead of London. He checked UK weather on his phone.

He left his car in the parking lot of his flat and put his apartment lights on a timer, just to be on the safe side. Then, after putting on his holster, his trenchcoat and adding a fedora to help further disguise himself, he took off, carrying Craig in his carrier with one hand and his suitcase with the other. He headed out to the Bondi trail, this time walking instead of running.

When he got closer to the shark carving by Tamarama, he paused to make sure there were no onlookers. It was early enough and foggy enough that the trail was quiet. He put the cat carrier down on the ground for a moment, and pulled up the app on his phone that allowed him to send out a drone anywhere in the world for his own private observation - he monitored Wayland's Smithy. It was close to seven AM Sydney time, so it was nearly six PM London time. It was raining over there, and on a rainy evening Anthony's suspicion that nobody would be hanging about the portal was correct.

Anthony took a deep breath. He picked up the cat carrier and began rolling his suitcase towards the shark carving. *This is the most batshit insane thing I've ever done in my entire life, and I've jumped out of a plane.*

With the clear mental image of Wayland's Smithy in his head, he stepped into the shark carving. At first there was nothing and Anthony wondered if it would work for him, and then he felt like he was being dropped through a furnace. Everything went ultraviolet. Craig began to scream in his carrier.

There was a white flash, and then he was at Wayland's Smithy. With wobbling legs, Anthony stepped forward, feeling about ready to fall over. Craig continued to howl, and Anthony stopped, put the cat carrier down on the ground, and got down on the ground, looking into the carrier, fitting his fingers through for Craig to sniff. "It's OK, little fella," Anthony soothed, feeling intensely bad for the cat's distress. "I'm sorry. I'm so sorry..."

Craig meowed again, his tail thumping angrily.

"I'm sorry. You'll get treats when we get to Gran's house, OK? I promise."

Anthony got up and called an Uber.

He was pensive and quiet on the drive out to Blackheath. He felt guilty for not calling his mother and announcing his arrival in advance, but he hoped she'd understand he needed respite, just like he had in October.

The cat, on the other hand, was not so quiet, which intensified his guilt - Anthony couldn't leave the cat alone for a few weeks, nor did he feel right about asking Sören to catsit, or trying to find a kennel. So Craig not only had to endure the rollercoaster ride of the gate, but now also a trip in the car, which was one of Craig's least favorite things. The Uber driver minded his own business until they were getting closer to the exit for Blackheath, finally the driver said, "He's not happy, is he?"

"No," Anthony said coolly, hoping this wasn't going to get into a conversation - he disliked small talk, especially when the circumstances of how he'd even arrived in England were not something he wanted to discuss with a stranger.

The driver didn't seem to take the hint of Anthony's tone and went on. "You brought a cat to visit Wayland's Smithy?"

Anthony sensed suspicion - like the driver was looking at something that wasn't quite right and not knowing what it was. Anthony had to think fast. He thought about telling the driver *mind your own business* and pushing with the Force, but that could backfire if the driver was Force-sensitive himself, and in any case he didn't like doing that sort of thing unless absolutely necessary as it felt like coercion. He didn't like lying, either, but he didn't want to risk the driver deciding he was going to be a do-gooder and call the police.

"I had a fight with the missus," Anthony said. He felt weird saying it, considering he was completely gay, but then he realized some of his distaste about lying was based in the fact that in his dreams - in what the others thought was his past life - he'd been in an arranged marriage with a woman, something he'd resented because he preferred men, and Sören and Dooku more particularly, but that was the law of the land. He was sure Maglor probably had some commentary about that in his notes. Anthony cleared his throat, shifted awkwardly in his seat and went on, "She was throwing things so I didn't want to wait outside at our place."

"I see. I'm sorry," the driver said. "Rough times."

"Yeah." Anthony got the sense the driver believed his lie - Anthony hated it - and looked out the window. "Going to stay with my mum for awhile."

"I hope things get better for you, man."

At this hour, on a rainy evening, Elaine was home; Anthony breathed a sigh of relief at the sight of the cobalt Aston Martin in the driveway. He tipped the driver well, and made sure the driver was gone before he walked to the door, not sure why he was being extra paranoid. Elaine opened the door before he could knock.

"Anthony!" Elaine looked shocked. She pulled him into a tight hug, then took the carrier. "I... I wasn't expecting this. Are you OK?"

"No," Anthony said.

Elaine raised an eyebrow. "Are you in danger?"

"No. I just..." Anthony looked down, feeling the tears come on, feeling like a small boy who needed his mummy to protect him from the big, bad world. "I need a break from everything for a little bit."

Elaine lowered her voice. "Does MI6 know you're here?"

Anthony shook his head. "I don't plan on telling them. I don't... need an issue with them about my assignment. I just needed a break."

"All right." Elaine sighed and patted him. "Come in, dear."

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Anthony spent the rest of September at his mother's house in Blackheath. He sent Sören an e-mail from one of his alternate accounts to let him know where he was, so Sören wouldn't worry, but he got the sense Sören was worried anyway - not so much about whether or not he was in any trouble, but whether or not *they* were in trouble. Anthony felt guilty about leaving like this, knowing Sören had abandonment issues, but he couldn't think of any other way to handle the situation of processing all of this.

It was an interesting contrast, reading through *The Silmarillion* and Maglor's notes by night, and by day, having something of a "normal" routine - working in the garden to tend to the late summer, early fall harvest, and planting for winter, helping his mother with chores and errands. Sometimes, he played the piano, something he hadn't done for years but came back to him as if he'd never stopped, and he wondered how many people in "the family" had some kind of musical talent, then felt self-conscious about thinking about "the family", still not wanting to believe, even as he increasingly could not deny it looked like he was a part of this. His mother wisely did not pry about why exactly he needed a break from his assignment, until the last day of September, a Thursday evening.

Anthony had made it all the way through *The Silmarillion* and Maglor's notes, and now he was doing a re-read of particularly relevant parts. After dinner that night he retreated to his old room, which had changed very little since he'd moved out in young adulthood, and he took out the book and the notebook. Craig joined him on the bed as he flipped to the passages he needed to examine, again.

Fëanor now began openly to speak words of rebellion against the Valar, crying aloud that he would depart from Valinor back to the world without, and would deliver the Noldor from thraldom, if they would follow him.

Then there was great unrest in Tirion, and Finwë was troubled; and he summoned all his lords to council. But Fingolfin hastened to his halls and stood before him, saying: 'King and father, wilt thou not restrain the pride of our brother, Curufinwë, who is called the Spirit of Fire, all too truly? By what right does he speak for all our people, as if he were King? Thou it was who long ago spoke before the Quendi, bidding them accept the summons of the Valar to Aman. Thou it was that led the Noldor upon the long road through the perils of Middle-earth to the light of Eldamar. If thou dost not now repent of it, two sons at least thou hast to honour thy words.'

But even as Fingolfin spoke, Fëanor strode into the chamber, and he was fully armed: his high helm upon his head, and at his side a mighty sword. 'So it is, even as I guessed,' he said. 'My half-brother would be before me with my father, in this as in all other matters.' Then turning upon Fingolfin he drew his sword, crying: 'Get thee gone, and take thy due

place!'

Fingolfin bowed before Finwë, and without word or glance to Fëanor he went from the chamber. But Fëanor followed him, and at the door of the king's house he stayed him; and the point of his bright sword he set against Fingolfin's breast 'See, half-brother!' he said. 'This is sharper than thy tongue. Try but once more to usurp my place and the love of my father, and maybe it will rid the Noldor of one who seeks to be the master of thralls.'

Anthony looked at Maglor's notes.

My father and his brothers were lovers. Because the Laws forbid any intimate relationships with one of the same gender, kin or not, they carried their affair in secret. But of course, rumors circulated, and when they got loud enough, action was necessary. My father and Fingolfin met in private to discuss staging a very public falling-out, to give the illusion to the public that they hated each other, which would quell any suspicion that they were lovers.

From everything I was told, this was also a bit of fun for them, role-playing a fight so they could "make up" afterwards in a most aggressive manner.

"I bet," Anthony said under his breath, thinking of the explosive sex he and Sören had during the confrontation over the Silmarils. He remembered when Dooku had come to visit on his own, to encourage Anthony to go see Sören.

"He hates me right now, I'm sure."

Dooku threw back his head and laughed. "If he does, it doesn't mean he doesn't also love you. I speak from experience. We haven't had many arguments over the last few years..." Now, before that is another story, *Dooku broadcasted.*

Anthony had thought that very strange at the time, but now he had a frisson down his spine, arms breaking out in gooseflesh, hair standing on end.

Incest among humans bothered him; for some reason, he wasn't bothered to know that Fëanor and his brothers had been lovers, or that Maglor had joined in when he was of age. It reminded him of the incest in mythologies, and it seemed to Anthony that maybe if everything hadn't gone the way it did, they could have ascended... and *that* was the ultimate reason why the Valar sought to control them, and then punish them for resisting. The Valar knew what they were capable of becoming.

What we still are *capable of becoming.* It occurred to Anthony that if the Valar were*still* trying to punish the House of Finwë collectively, and enlisting other gods to help - like Odin - they were still afraid, as if they knew that even in mortal forms, they were still powerful. Anthony chewed on that as he flipped the pages.

The sons of Finarfin were Finrod the faithful (who was afterwards named Felagund, Lord of Caves), Orodreth, Angrod, and Aegnor; these four were as close in friendship with the sons of Fingolfin as though they were all brothers. A sister they had, Galadriel, most beautiful of all the house of Finwë; her hair was lit with gold as though it had caught in a mesh the radiance of Laurelin.

Anthony recalled the dream he'd had of Galadriel, reaching out to him and calling him *Father.*

But in that hour Finarfin forsook the march, and turned back, being filled with grief, and

with bitterness against the House of Fëanor, because of his kinship with Olwë of Alqualondë; and many of his people went with him, retracing their steps in sorrow, until they beheld once more the far beam of the Mindon upon Túna still shining in the night, and so came at last to Valinor. There they received the pardon of the Valar, and Finarfin was set to rule the remnant of the Noldor in the Blessed Realm.

Maglor's notes:

Fëanor told Finarfin to return to Valinor and pretend he had repented of the rebellion, for the sake of his children. Finarfin was reluctant to leave - he was prepared to die for Fëanor's cause if necessary - but that was exactly why Fëanor pushed him. "If you would die for me, you must live for me. Do not let our flame be extinguished."

Anthony's eyes burned with tears. Another shiver went through him. And even though he knew it was what Fëanor had asked of him, he nonetheless got the sense that Fëanor wasn't happy with it just the same - he had expected more resistance, he had secretly wanted Finarfin to be just as stubborn as he was, dig in his heels, and insist to stay. Fëanor felt abandoned, and the last tether to his sanity broke. Sören's abandonment issues weren't just from things he'd endured in this life, but the wounds were ancient. *And I caused one of them.* Anthony thought bitterly that maybe if he'd stayed, they could have had a chance, standing together.

Or maybe our bloodline would have been completely wiped out.

And then there was the last.

Finrod walks with Finarfin his father beneath the trees in Eldamar.

Maglor's note was *Finarfin died, fighting Balrogs alongside Ecthelion, my son. Tolkien wrote this passage to comfort me, an attempt at "fix-it fic", I suppose you could call it. But the truth is, both Finrod and Finarfin were reborn as mortal.*

Of course, Anthony knew now that the recurring dreams he'd had of fighting fire demons to avenge Sören - those were Balrogs. The blue-eyed version of Maglor was Maglor's son... Finarfin's grand-nephew.

Anthony thought of Dag. While Maglor's notes did not mention him, he recalled that protective, paternal urge he'd had towards the teenage boy lost outside of Big Ben - Anthony hadn't been very old himself, only twenty-one, and not *so* much older than the sixteen-year-old Dag, but Anthony found himself behaving like Dag's father, to the point where Dag had remarked on it. At the time of course it hadn't struck him as odd, but now...

Anthony closed the book and the notebook, buried his face in his hands, and tried to calm down, taking a few deep breaths. But there was no calm to be had, not with this. He couldn't deny it anymore, as strange as it was, and with all of the implied danger of their position, enemies greater than any governments or terrorist cells. Anthony knew he had to go back to Sydney - back to Sören - and face this reality. It hurt, knowing what had been done to their family, knowing that he, as Finarfin, had possibly altered history because he hadn't stayed, he hadn't fought harder to stand with his brothers.

He started to weep, feeling the weight of the world on his shoulders - the past, which he couldn't change, and the future, which felt even more uncertain than it had before. He heard Elaine's footsteps down the hall and even as he tried to pull himself together, not wanting his mother to hear him cry, she paused outside his door and knocked.

"Anthony? Anthony, dear, are you all right?"

"I'm fine, Mum," Anthony lied.

"Are you decent?"

"Er, yes."

Elaine opened the door and gave him a look. "You're not fine, Cornelius Anthony."

Anthony cried harder. "God, I'm sorry. I just..."

Elaine sat on the edge of his bed and gently began rubbing his back, like when he was a child and had nightmares - like wandering endlessly in snow and ice, what he now knew was remembering the Helcaraxë.

"Anthony, forgive me for asking," Elaine said, "but... why are you here? Why haven't you gone back to your assignment in Sydney? Did something happen?"

"Not... not exactly."

Elaine picked up *The Silmarillion* and stared at it. Anthony swallowed hard, hoping she wasn't going to ask why he was reading that. Then Elaine put the book down and raised an eyebrow. "It's a guy, isn't it? You got involved with your assignment."

Anthony facepalmed, and nodded. He took his hand away from his face and wiped his eyes. Elaine patted his back and Anthony sat up. "Yeah, I fell in love with the man I'm supposed to be protecting. Well... one of them." He was attracted to Dooku and Maglor as well but it wasn't the same intensity of feeling he had for Sören.

"So... did you and he have a row? Or..."

"It's complicated."

Elaine pursed her lips and her shoulders fell. "Are you reading *The Silmarillion* to put everything in perspective? 'It's bad, but at least it isn't as bad as *that*?'"

Anthony gave a nervous laugh. "No..." Before he could stop himself, feeling like he couldn't hide much from his mother, he said, "I'm reading it for reasons."

"Reasons."

"Reasons."

There was a long pause. Elaine moved from the edge of Anthony's bed to sit in an armchair across from the bed, allowing Anthony to sit up. Craig climbed on Anthony's shoulder and dangled off; Anthony pet him, listening to Craig's purr, collecting his thoughts.

"Things got really weird with the assignment," Anthony said. "Like... falling down the rabbit hole and into Wonderland, levels of weird. I came here because I needed to take a few steps back and re-evaluate everything that's going on, and... where I fit into it. Because I got a bit entangled."

Elaine nodded, just listening.

Anthony decided to take a shot, hoping his mother wouldn't think he'd completely gone mad and suggest he get some help. "Mum, you were... a hippie back in the late 60s and early 70s, right? You said you did the sex, drugs and rock and roll thing for awhile."

"I did," Elaine said.

"I know that things like, ah, the Hare Krishna movement and Transcendental Meditation and the like got popular among that set in Britain. The Beatles were into it. Were you?"

"Yes and no," Elaine said.

Anthony raised an eyebrow. "Care to elaborate? Like... did you ever look at things like reincarnation?"

"As a matter of fact, I did," Elaine said. She chuckled. "I went to a fortune teller a few times to have my palm read, have my cards read. Most of the so-called psychics I saw were of course trying to scam me, but there was one who correctly predicted my life. My marriage to your father, having a son who would fight in a war..." Elaine's lips quirked. "She told me I had a past life as a queen. Two sons, two daughters, one stepson, many grandchildren. That my family, back then, had been 'marred by great sorrow'. I never knew what to make of it, since everything else she told me was true."

Indis. A shiver went through Anthony again. It explained why Galadriel looked like his mother - she looked like her grandmother. He could see it now, a young version of Elaine with golden hair, laughing as she walked through a garden.

"Why do you ask?"

"Your life is in this book," Anthony said. "I don't know if you've ever read it -"

"I haven't. I was put off to reading it by hearing it was full of tragedy. I don't like sad stories."

"Yeah. Well..." Anthony took a deep breath. "This is classified, this is strictly off the record, you understand, but I met the guy who told Tolkien the history of his people, and Tolkien presented it as fiction. He... says he's known me before."

Anthony immediately felt like hiding under his bed, feeling like he'd said the wrong thing, that his mother wasn't just going to accept everything - he'd struggled with it and his entire job was about handling the paranormal; he'd gotten his inquisitor tendencies from his mother - but then Elaine came over and just gave him a fierce, tight hug.

"I believe you," Elaine said.

Anthony breathed a small sigh of relief, then he fell apart again.

Elaine rocked him like he was a boy again, smoothed his hair, kissed his brow. "And that's why you've been here all this time? You feel as if you've gone mad -"

"Yes."

Elaine pulled back a little. "So is the one you're in love with the one who spoke with Tolkien, or -"

"No, although he's also... involved, connected, in all of this. Actually... you met him last year, at Qui's wake. His name is Sören."

"Ah, yes, I remember that name. It's... interesting... that your paths crossed."

"Yeah."

Elaine frowned. "I don't want to sound as if I'm throwing you out, you know that you're always welcome to come home, but you need to go back to him. It sounds to me that whatever soul-searching you had to do, needed a break to do, has been done."

"I'm worried he's going to be upset with me for leaving."*Again.* He had created a bit of a situation - he had to take a break for his own mental health, but in doing so he possibly created tension that would be even worse in the long run.

"I think if your roots run that deep, he would have a hard time cutting you off," Elaine said.

Anthony wept some more.

"How did you get here?" Elaine asked. "Shall I book you a ticket -"

"I... didn't... fly. I could use a ride. To Wayland's Smithy."

Elaine gave him a confused look, and Anthony said, "That's more classified information, but places like that can be used as... transporter devices, I guess you could call it. Walk through one door, step out another." Then he glared, hoping he hadn't said too much. "Don't use them, you could end up lost..."

Elaine tousled his hair. "No, though perhaps someday you'll show me. Come on, pack your things and I'll drive you out there."

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It was eight in the morning Sydney time when Anthony arrived back at the shark carving. It was another foggy day and he was glad there were no observers.

He knew Sören wasn't likely to be up at this hour on a Friday morning, or only very reluctantly, which was just as well because his first priority was getting Craig home. Then he needed to tend to his fridge and get rid of the food that had spoiled during the near-month he'd been away.

He went for a run to burn off the adrenaline of the jump through the gate and the prospect of seeing Sören, who was probably going to be upset that he'd left and been gone for so long. He decided after the run to put off seeing Sören till a bit later, not wanting to spring heavy emotions on him first thing in the morning.

Later became a lot later - Anthony drove over there at seven PM. Even though he had keys, he still knocked as a measure of courtesy. Maglor answered the door and they just looked at each other for a moment before Maglor stepped back, gesturing for him to come in.

Sören was playing Team Fortress 2 with Kenny, Ali, and Maglor, and the game paused

when Anthony walked in, looking around. Sören's eyes widened and his lips parted, and Anthony saw Sören's eyes brighten, filling with tears. He went right over, got on his knees before Sören, and lay his head in Sören's lap, tears stinging his own eyes.

"Forgive me," Anthony said, his voice shaking.

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Anthony stayed in the guest room that night. He and Sören just held each other all night, crying together.

"I'm sorry I left," Anthony choked out, rocking him. "Never again. I'm so sorry, it won't happen again..."

At least Sören accepted the closeness, wasn't running away or telling him to get out. At some point they finally were all cried out and, exhausted, fell asleep in each other's arms.

Anthony woke up to the sound of the baby crying, and a cool spot opening in the bed as Sören went to the nursery to take care of his son. Sören came back a little while later, looking grumpy, and climbed back into bed. Anthony looked at the clock - it was just after five AM.

Anthony gave him a little kiss, testing the waters between them, and Sören kissed the tip of his nose. They rubbed noses, their foreheads pressed together, breathing each other's breath, and then their mouths met, tongues playing, the kiss deepening as the pent-up hunger of the last near-month apart consumed them both.

When they pulled back, breathing harder, Sören looked at him like he could eat Anthony alive, and the next thing they knew, they were getting out of their pajamas as quickly as possible. Once they were naked they began kissing again, hands roaming over each other's bodies, needing to make up for lost time touching, feeling each other.

They lost themselves in kiss after kiss, hard cocks rubbing together. Anthony looked down between kisses and saw they were both already leaking precum. With a look of mischief in his eyes, Sören reached and spread some of his own precum onto his fingers, then stuck them in Anthony's mouth. Anthony groaned as he sucked at Sören's fingers, and then he began kissing and licking Sören's neck, his cock jolting at the way Sören moaned and shivered against him. "I want to taste you," Anthony rasped, before giving a little nibble on the sweet spot where the neck and shoulder met. He licked up Sören's neck and whispered, "I need to taste my brother."

Sören's breath hitched and his fists clenched before his fingers brushed down Anthony's sensitive spine. Sören smirked and kissed his mouth before he husked, "Only if I can taste you, too."

They got into a sixty-nine, laying at each other's sides. Anthony sucked Sören's cock like he was starving for it, like his life depended on that cock in his mouth. Sören sucked him with the same fierce passion, his talented mouth getting Anthony closer and closer to climax, but they both held back, wanting to stay in this moment, wanting to stay connected and pleasure each other for as long as possible. They teased, licking each other's cocks, before sucking again. Sören began sucking at just the head, one hand rubbing up and down the shaft as he used his other hand to work his finger in and out of Anthony, and Anthony did the same, almost losing it when Sören started rocking against

his fingers, fucking himself. It didn't take much longer, with Anthony letting go and coming in Sören's mouth, rewarded a few seconds later by the sweet taste of Sören's release. He drank as much as he could, and licked Sören's cock clean.

They kissed, tasting their essence combined. More kisses and caresses got them both going again. Anthony reached between them and took their hard cocks in his fist, his other hand playing over Sören's body, teasing the pierced nipples... petting Sören's hair and face. Looking into those beautiful brown eyes between kisses.

"You came back," Sören said. "I was so afraid you wouldn't come back."*That you'd left like Maglor did.*

"I know. I'm sorry." Anthony had said it dozens of times last night, but it still didn't feel like enough to express his regret at leaving, wishing he hadn't needed to go and get some space to figure things out. "I'm here now. I'll never leave you again."

Sören put his hand on top of Anthony's hand working their cocks, and kissed him hard. "I love you."

"I love you." Anthony kissed the tip of Sören's nose. "I've always loved you, Fëanáro. I will always love you."

Sören kissed him even harder. They continued kissing, not able to get enough. Each deep, needy kiss intensified the pleasure of their cocks rubbing together in Anthony's hand, and at last they were both *right there*, panting, shaking, Sören looking at him with wild, desperate eyes. Sören shuddered and gasped out, "Ara..." and began to shoot.

The sight and feel of Sören's cock coming on his undid him, and watching their cocks spurt together, cock coming on cock, seed pouring down their shafts, made Anthony come so hard it almost hurt. "Sören. Fëanáro..."

They kissed, moaning into each other's mouths, the pleasure throbbing across their bond so it felt for an instant like they were one. Everything was Silmaril-bright, and at least for now they were OK again.

They lay there, basking in the warm, glowy bliss. Anthony resumed petting Sören's curls, and just when Anthony thought Sören was dozing off a little, Sören reached up and tweaked his nose before booping it. Anthony smiled fondly, remembering that Fëanor sometimes did the same thing to Finarfin after sex.

"How's your mum?" Sören asked, his voice thick with sleepiness.

"She's Indis," Anthony said, and then clapped his hand over his mouth - that wasn't the answer he wanted to give, but there it was.

Sören started laughing - a little chuckle at first, then it bubbled into giggles, until Sören was shaking and snorting. "Wow, what an answer."

"She and I discussed things while I was out there."

"I'm not surprised, honestly. My mum was Miriel." Sören sighed.

"I know that you and Indis weren't on the best of terms back then, but... she'd like to see you again." Anthony thought of the last conversation he had with Elaine, before she dropped him off at Wayland's Smithy. *I hope you bring that Sören around sometime. He*

seemed like such a sweet boy.

"I'd like to see her again," Sören said. "I mean, Finrod and I weren't exactly best friends back then either, but..."

"He reincarnated as your brother."

"Yeah." Sören frowned.

"I'm... I'm so sorry." Anthony sighed and kissed Sören's forehead. "I hope we find him someday." That trail was very cold now and MI6 had written him off as "presumed dead", but...

Sören changed the subject - Anthony could feel him trying not to have a meltdown, to stay positive in the afterglow. "Speaking of family reunions, ah, we've been talking about if you came back and... we'd like you to come with us to Ceduna."

"I was supposed to catsit for your cats."

Sören shrugged. "We can take the cats with us. All the cats, including yours. Ali says her parents like animals."

Anthony's arms tightened around Sören. He didn't have to think of the answer. "OK."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah."

Sören gave him a kiss. "Good."

Anthony smiled. He was touched to be considered part of the family enough to come along to Ceduna, for such a personal event as Sören and Margrét reuniting with their uncle.

"There is one thing, though," Sören said. "The guest house has three bedrooms. We were planning on one for the guys, one for the ladies, one for the kids. I know you don't mind sleeping with me, but I know you haven't gone there with Nico and Maglor..." *Yet,* Sören broadcasted.

While Anthony wanted to, eventually, he knew that was as much up to them and he didn't want to force it on them as "we were involved in a past life, we're obligated to be together again now". "I can get some camping gear, if your uncle's place has enough space. I don't mind."

"Oh, I think they have enough space. I wasn't asking you to do that, but -"

"No, it's OK. Besides, there's not a lot of light pollution out there in the outback, it'll be nice to sleep out under the stars."

"I think your Eldar is showing," Sören said with a smirk.

Anthony looked down at their cocks, and back up with a wicked grin. Sören giggled again and kissed him before rolling Anthony onto his back.

Chapter 36

It was the night before the family was set to go on their two-day driving adventure to Ceduna, and Ali and Kenny had decided to go on a date, since they knew the two weeks in Ceduna would be dominated by spending time with Ali's parents and brother and there wouldn't be a lot of "us" time except late in the evening before bed. It had also been quite awhile since Ali and Kenny had gone out on a proper romantic evening - like most couples who'd been together a long time, those evenings out were the stuff of the early days of their relationship - things like going out to a movie on their own replaced by taking the kids to a movie, or watching a movie after the kids had gone to bed, on the couch. Ali didn't mind terribly, she didn't like getting dressed up as a rule, and they didn't need grand flowery gestures to prove they loved each other. Every day was special in its own way. Nonetheless, Ali felt giddy about the date, like she was young and love was new again.

Her giddiness intensified when she got her first look at Kenny, ready to go. He was wearing a black blazer and trousers, with a blue button-down shirt. Ali's baby bump was just starting to show and she'd recently bought some maternity clothes, including a little black dress that she was wearing for the occasion, which she paired with a strand of silvery-white genuine pearls, spaced with small nuggets of Baltic amber, that had belonged to her paternal grandmother Dagný and had been left to her father, who had given it to Ali for her eighteenth birthday, what felt like ages ago. Her locks were in a ponytail, revealing matching pearl drop earrings.

They were going to a restaurant at the Opera House, a place called Bennelong that Sören and Dooku had highly recommended. On their way out, Ali couldn't help smiling at the sight of Sören and Dooku both playing Legos with Metallica and Megadeth, building an elaborate, brightly colored Lego castle, while Kate and Tori played with blocks in their playpen. Dooku was working on a Lego moat, and explaining to the kids, "A moat helps protect the castle by making it harder for enemies to get to it, they would have to pass through the moat and that's not such a wise thing to do whilst wearing armor. Even less wise if the moat is full of dangerous creatures... or at least rumored to be full of them."

"Like dragons?" Metallica asked.

"I suppose," Dooku said. "They would have to be rather small dragons to fit in a moat."

"Small dragons can still kick lots of arse," Metallica said.

Sören grinned, and then he chimed in the conversation. "No, Metallica, don't say that."

Ali raised an eyebrow - Sören was the person in the household *least* qualified to give a lecture about swearing, and Ali and Kenny had a policy that they didn't care if the kids swore so long as they did it at home - but then Sören went on, "They wouldn't *kick* arse, they would bite it. Or burn it to a crisp with fire."

"Burn arse!" Megadeth yelled, and threw the horns. Metallica did too. Ali chuckled.

Sören nodded and went on, "If the invaders brought boats to try to get through the moat, a dragon would be very useful, to burn the boats."

"You would say that," Dooku muttered, continuing to build the moat with blue Legos.

"Wow," Ali said. "The more things change..."

Maglor looked up from his book - he was reading *Insomnia* by Stephen King - and then his eyes widened at the sight of Ali and Kenny. Ali did a twirl, and Maglor let out a low whistle. "You look beautiful," Maglor said. He glanced at Kenny and looked him up and down. "And you look sharp."

"Thanks," Kenny said; Ali noticed Kenny's cheeks flushed pink.

"All right, we're off," Ali said, taking Kenny's hand. She blew a kiss at Maglor, then waved goodbye to Sören, Dooku, and the kids.

It was Ali and Kenny's first visit to the Opera House since moving to Sydney. Ali had seen plenty of pictures but it was breathtaking in person, and Ali was glad she got to share the wonder with Kenny. She didn't even mind when he stopped to take pictures of the Opera House and Sydney Harbour, glowing in the blue, lavender and peach sunset - it was nice to see Kenny so enthusiastic about something he needed to take pictures. Ali smiled and laughed when Kenny took a picture of her, "the most beautiful of all."

Then Ali squeaked as she saw a seal sitting on the northern VIP steps of the Opera House. Sören had told her about Benny, but now she got to see Benny the seal in person and it was even more adorable than what she had envisioned. Kenny took pictures of Benny, too, getting as close as he could without disturbing the seal.

"We should take the kids here sometime just to see the seal," Kenny said. "They'd love that."

"They would."

"Probably Mag - ah, Marcus would, too." And then Kenny's cheeks were pink again.

Ali raised an eyebrow, but didn't say anything - yet. For the last few months Ali had gotten the sense that Kenny had a little crush on Maglor. She knew it was probably weird for Kenny, since as far as she knew his sexual and romantic history had been exclusively with women, at least in this life. Kenny of course had dreamt of when they were Fingon and Maedhros, and he seemed fairly accepting and nonchalant about their past history, but it was also easier to separate the past from the present. Ali knew that Kenny had been a teenager in the 90s, which was to all accounts a far less enlightened time and if he'd had any bisexual inclinations he'd likely learned to suppress them. But it was a bit harder to suppress in 2021 when LGBT people were more visible in society, and they were living in "a house full of gay", as Sören himself had called it.

Ali looked at the sea, thinking of Maglor - thinking of the days when Fingon, Maedhros and Maglor were all lovers.

They continued to walk around, breathing in the salt air, taking in the sight of the Opera House's architecture, the view of the Harbour, and the very cute seal resting on the steps, until it was time to head inside for their reservation. They were promptly seated, and Ali's mouth opened as she examined the menu, almost overwhelmed by how delicious everything looked. Sören had recommended the Wagyu beef, and they both ordered that, and a supplement of Tasmanian rock lobster. Ali went with scallops on the side, and Kenny chose squid in a ginger sauce. Kenny had a glass of Sauvignon Blanc, while Ali refrained from alcohol, both because of her pregnancy and being the driver, opting for a mocktail mojito.

When the food arrived, Kenny and Ali dug into the lobster first - Ali couldn't remember the

last time she'd had lobster, guessing it had been years ago during one of her trips to the States to visit Kenny's family.

Through a mouthful of lobster, Kenny started laughing.

"What?" Ali raised an eyebrow.

Kenny began to play air guitar, singing "der-ner-ner, der-ner, der-ner-ner-ner-ner-ner... Rock lobster!"

"Oh *god.*" Ali facepalmed. "You... you didn't."

"*We were at the beach / Everybody had matching towels / Somebody went under a dock / And there they saw a rock / It wasn't a rock / It was a rock lobster!*"

Ali doubled over. People from a couple of nearby tables were staring at them now and Kenny said, "Thank you, thank you, I'm here all evening."

"You are the biggest goober in existence next to my da." Ali narrowed her eyes. "And Sören. No wonder the two of you get along so well."

"Sören's my bro." Kenny snickered. "Uncle Bro."

There was musical entertainment this evening, which had been part of the draw of Bennelong - they used to go to concerts when their relationship was new, and hadn't been to a gig together in years. This wasn't rock, of course - tonight there was a jazz band. They were good, and the male crooner singing Sinatra standards was pleasant to listen to, but when Kenny and Ali looked at each other across the table, Ali knew exactly what Kenny was thinking.

"Mag- Marcus," Kenny quickly corrected himself, careful with the alias in public, "could bring the house down."

"Yeah." Ali sighed, feeling regret that Maglor's talent couldn't be shared with the world for the necessity of keeping a low profile. Maglor could sing anything - opera, torch songs, pop, R&B, metal - and sound good. Even though it was necessary and important that Ali and Kenny got some couple time just to themselves, Ali couldn't help but miss Maglor a little, remembering Maedhros, Maglor, and Fingon doing little romantic evenings back in the day.

"Maybe we can... take him with us the next time we come here," Kenny said. "I know he won't be able to take the mic, but... he should see the Opera House too. Maybe there's a concert he'd be interested in."

Ali smiled. Then she suspected, again, that Kenny had a crush on him and she wondered if this was his way of starting to broach the subject of including Maglor in their relationship.

Ali had fresh mango for dessert, while Kenny had a Pavlova; he fed Ali a couple bites of his Pavlova and Ali said, "Oh shit, this should be called Pavlov instead, it's droolworthy."

"You want to order one for yourself?"

Ali shook her head. "I was really craving mango. If I eat this and one of those, I'll explode."

"It's funny that you're craving mango. My mom said that when she was pregnant with me she used to crave mushrooms. I remember when you were pregnant with the twins and you would eat the *weirdest* food combinations, like kipper snacks with salami and a bowl of blueberries, at two in the morning."

"At least mango is healthy." Ali patted her stomach. "Maybe this one will eat vegetables without having to use too much coercion."

"I mean, I did finally get Megadeth to eat broccoli when I pointed out it looks like how trees look to huge dinosaurs like T-rex, so he pretends to be a dinosaur while eating it. And I told Metallica cauliflower looks like brains so she can pretend to be a zombie and eat brains. But that took awhile of going crazy trying to figure out what to do. I can't imagine where our kids got the stubborn from." Kenny batted his lashes, giving Ali an innocent look.

Ali snorted. "Are you implying that I'm stubborn?"

"I'm not *implying* anything. You are stubborn."

Ali blew a raspberry.

Kenny had a second glass of wine with his dessert - just enough to relax and be mellow, not so much he couldn't consent later. Ali was feeling a bit randy, with Kenny looking especially handsome tonight, and she was in a good mood between the wonderful evening and the holiday starting tomorrow. She couldn't wait to see her family again, and to walk in the outback once more. She didn't mind city life - her brother Darren had never been suited for it - but the outback felt like it had permanently burned a link into her soul, she needed to go back there at least once in awhile to re-align. Just thinking about where she came from had a strange effect on her, making her feel more alive, every sensation more intense, the world seeming to buzz.

"I love it when you smile like that," Kenny said.

"Oh, was I smiling?" Ali didn't even realize. She sipped ice water and leaned back in her seat. "Life just... feels good right now."

"It does," Kenny said. "We've had a bit of chaos this year but things have finally calmed down. The future seems very bright." Kenny reached across the table to take her hand. "Like your smile." Now he smiled too. "You and that smile are my future."

"Ohhhh, Kenny."

"Listen..." Kenny cleared his throat. "I wanted to ask you something."

Ali braced herself, wondering if Kenny was just going to come right out and ask about a threesome with Maglor - though this was an awfully public place for such a private conversation.

Kenny went on, "I know when we first got together we decided against getting married, that we didn't need a piece of paper to prove we love each other, and we didn't want a court battle if things didn't work out. But several years later..." Their eyes met. "I feel pretty confident we're not going anywhere. I like the symbolism of a commitment ceremony in front of other people. And with the talks you've had about Sören and, you know, the thing..." *Immortality and relationships with mortals.* "I'm forty-one now, we're not going to

live forever and in the event something happens to either of us it's easier to distribute property and handle custodial arrangements if we're formally married. So, ah..." Kenny got down on his knees at the side of the table and Ali saw him reach into his trouser pocket. He produced a small black box, and opened it to reveal a white gold band set with three small white diamonds. "Will you marry me?"

Ali nodded and started crying. "Yes." When Kenny got up from the table to slip the ring on her finger, Ali threw her arms around him and Kenny pulled her close - with him standing and her sitting her head was up to his mid-torso. He playfully gave her a noogie before his arms were around her, and the two of them rocked for a minute, with Ali sobbing, overcome by love, joy so fierce she felt she could burst.

When Kenny sat back down he called for the check. "Do you want to think of a date? And a place?"

"The Opera House is a beautiful location," Ali said. "Though, Mum and Da and Darren would have to travel and they won't want to leave no one at the farm, even for a couple of days."

"We could get married in Ceduna."

"We can't do it this trip. Australian law says a minimum of one month. That's also contingent on when we can book the celebrant, we might have a few months' wait depending on when one is available." Ali knew this from when Darren had his shotgun wedding years ago.

"Isn't there a form, something you can fill out to shorten the process? I thought I saw something like that when I was looking at Australian marriage laws before the proposal." Kenny took out his phone and Ali waited as he Googled. Kenny's face fell as he looked at the form. "Ugh, OK, no we don't fit the employment-related or medical reasons or legal proceedings."

"It's not like we can't go back to Ceduna in a few months," Ali said. "I'm sure Mum and Da would be thrilled to see us a little more often."

"You're right," Kenny said, putting the phone back in his pocket. "I should have asked you a month ago, but I was waiting for the right moment. It'll work out, though, I guess - I won't say no to another trip out there in a few months."

"We should also let your folks know so they can make travel arrangements," Ali said.

"God, I'm gonna have to break it to Mike." Kenny's brother Mike was a professional computer hacker, paid to exploit weaknesses in companies' systems and code ways to improve security; Mike had also been through a bitter divorce three years ago, where he was paying large alimony payments to his ex-wife. "I hope he won't lecture me."

"Yeh." Ali frowned. Darren, too, had been through a messy divorce - messier when he fought for joint custody of his three kids after he got out of prison and began rebuilding his life - but she knew Darren was capable of putting his own feelings about marriage aside to be happy for her.

Ali looked down at the ring on her hand, sparkling in the lamplight. It was simple and elegant, and the symbolism of three diamonds had not been lost on her - the three Silmarils... *and Maedhros, Fingon and Maglor.*

After the check came they took one last walk around the Opera House and look out at the Harbour before going back to the Land Rover. The blue twilight and the first few stars in the sky made Ali feel wistful, thinking of all they had lost, all they had found... all they would lose again. For now, they had peace, and Ali drank deep of it, trying to savor what they had while they had it. Trying to keep some hope that they might defeat the Doom in her lifetime, so she could be rejoined with Kenny in the afterlife instead of banished to the Void or otherwise punished by the Valar.

Kenny put an arm around her waist and kissed her cheek. "It'll be OK, babe. We didn't come this far for nothing."

Ali closed her eyes and saw herself jumping in the chasm to escape the searing pain of the fiery Silmaril - the trauma of the torture Maedhros had endured, reliving his captivity over and over again in nightmares and flashbacks, forever haunted. *We came far for nothing last time.* But Ali didn't say it aloud. She shivered even though the spring night wasn't terribly cold, and turned to smile at Kenny, bringing herself back to the present. They had, indeed, found their way to each other again, and that had to count for something. Even Maglor was happier now.

Maglor. Ali felt a sharp ache, missing him again - feeling a little guilty for missing him like this when they were spending "just the two of us" time... but it was like they were three parts of a whole, the absence acute in moments like this, looking out at the twilit sea.

"Come on," Kenny said, taking her hand, as if he somehow sensed that loss. "Let's go home."

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They returned just in time to tuck in Metallica and Megadeth - Maglor had seen to their bedtime story.

The perfect end to a romantic evening would have been a dip in the hot tub but Ali didn't want to risk that while pregnant. Kenny had showered just before they went out, so Ali took a shower by herself, and when she came back in the bedroom she saw Kenny had taken the time while she was in the shower to light candles and arrange bouquets of flowers. Ali grinned as she walked in the room, taking a look around.

"You're so sweet," Ali said.

"Here," Kenny said, holding out his arms. He was shirtless, wearing black silk pajama pants. "I want to hold you for awhile before we do anything."

That, too, was delightfully romantic - as horny as Ali was, she loved cuddling, and it was nice to get some dedicated cuddle time with her husband-to-be. They snuggled, rocking together gently, and Kenny rubbed her back as she rested her head on his shoulder.

"Mmm, that's nice," Ali purred, melting into his touch.

"So I was thinking..." Kenny's fingers drummed her back before resuming a slow, circular motion. "I wanted to ask Maglor to be the best man at our wedding. Considering our past history and all."

Ali snorted. "Past history," she muttered, before she could stop herself.

Kenny stopped rubbing her back and sat up. *Oh shit,* Ali thought to herself. *Now I've done it.* Ali also sat up and looked Kenny in the eye. Kenny's face was pink again, and Ali fought the urge to laugh.

"Yeah," Kenny huffed. "About... about that."

Ali waited. *Now* they were going to talk about that.

"I'm not gay," Kenny said.

Ali patted her stomach. "I'd got that, yeh."

"But, uh." Kenny cleared his throat. He glanced off to the side and squirmed uncomfortably. "Look, I'd be lying if I said I..." Kenny pinched the bridge of his nose. "God, this is weird."

"You fancy him, don't you?"

Kenny facepalmed and then rubbed his face, and gave Ali a look like an annoyed wet cat who'd just been given a bath. Now Ali laughed, not able to help it. Kenny exhaled sharply and said, "I don't know what I'd call it. I usually, you know, *don't* look at men this way, but, but..." Kenny glanced back at Ali. "*You* were hot back in the day, all right, and now there's..." Kenny threw his hands in the air. "Stupid sexy Maglor."

Ali fell back on the bed, laughing so hard she started wheezing, her sides cramping, tears streaming down her cheeks.

"It's not funny, Ali."

"No, it's fucking hilarious."

Kenny glared, which made it even funnier to Ali. Then there was a knock at the bedroom door and Kenny jumped, and Ali lost it again.

"Yeh?" Ali called.

"I heard my name," Maglor said from behind the door. "May I... may I come in?"

"Yeh, you can come in," Ali said. Kenny looked mortified, and he gave a weak smile as Maglor walked in.

"Hi," Kenny said.

"Hi," Maglor replied.

"Hi."

"Hi."

"Hi."

"Hi."

"Hi."

"Hello."

"Hi."

"Greetings."

"Hi."

"Salutations."

Ali cracked up laughing again. She gestured for Maglor to come over, and he gingerly sat on the edge of the bed, looking at them expectantly.

"I didn't mean to eavesdrop," Maglor said, "but the Song makes it difficult to ignore when someone is talking about me in the vicinity."

"Oh god," Kenny muttered. He cleared his throat and straightened his posture. "What did you hear, exactly?"

Maglor grinned. "'Stupid sexy Maglor?'"

Kenny facepalmed. Ali howled. Ali patted him. "Kenny, it's all right. I'm not judging you."

"This is... this is so weird for me," Kenny said. "I normally don't like dudes that way."

"Neither does Frankie," Ali said, "but she made the exception for Loki, and for Sören. Sören leans mostly gay, and he made the exception for Frankie. It happens. It doesn't mean you're gay. It doesn't mean you're straight, either, it just means, well..." Ali gestured to Maglor. "I mean, look at him. It's hard *not* to have that reaction to him." She grinned at Maglor, who grinned back.

"I don't like labels," Maglor said, "but bisexuality was the norm for our people. Of course, the Valar tried to make us deny our nature."

"You never had a problem with me being bi," Ali said to Kenny. "I don't have a problem with this. If anything, I think it would be kind of hot if the two of you..."

Kenny blushed again. He looked at Maglor, then quickly looked away.

"I won't force anything on you," Maglor said. "I know this is unsettling for you and I don't want to make you uncomfortable. But if you *are* curious, and willing, I'm... well, I talked to Sören and Nicolae about this awhile back, and they're OK with it and... I've got some free time this evening. Sören and Nicolae are taking some time together, considering how much Sören has seen of Anthony since he came back."

So when are the four of you... Ali let the question trail off.

I'm leaving that up to him, Maglor spoke into her mind. *Anthony is still processing everything and having one relationship is a new experience for him, never mind two more partners.*

Ali gave a little nod and then she turned to Kenny. "What do you say? You want to try a threesome?"

"You're not going to think I'm being selfish?" Kenny asked. "This was our night..."

Ali gave him a playful shove. "This fulfills one of my fantasies, it definitely still counts. So go on then..."

Kenny looked at Maglor and took a deep breath. He smiled shyly, and then he said, "Hi."

Maglor smirked. "Hi."

"Hi."

"Hi."

"Hi."

"Hi."

"Hi."

"Hello."

"Hi."

"WILL YOU TWO JUST FUCKING SNOG EACH OTHER," Ali yelled.

Kenny moved in slowly, and then Maglor took the lead, grabbing Kenny's face and kissing him. The kiss was gentle at first, Maglor being careful with Kenny's comfort levels, but the kiss quickly deepened, all of the age-old passion roaring back, and Ali's breath hitched as she watched the erotic sight play out before her.

She shed her camisole and panties, and climbed back onto the bed naked just as Kenny and Maglor pulled apart. Ali snickered at the sight of Kenny's pajama bottoms tented with an obvious erection, and Maglor grinned, mischief in his eyes. Kenny stood up then, shucked his pajamas, and then he was naked too.

Maglor took off his clothes and joined them. Ali kissed Kenny, then Maglor, and watched as they kissed each other again, Kenny bolder than before, getting into it. They looked at her when the kiss broke, and Ali drew their heads to her breasts, moaning and sighing as they lapped and suckled her nipples - having both her nipples sucked at the same time was so exquisite that Ali almost came from that alone.

Ali lay back and Kenny and Maglor explored her body together, kissing, licking and nibbling at her stomach and thighs. Ali slid a pillow under her hips for better access and opened to them, and Kenny and Maglor began to pleasure her, Kenny lapping and sucking her clit, Maglor's tongue lashing inside her. Then they switched, Maglor kissing her clit while Kenny's tongue played inside. Just before she could climax they stopped, sensing she was close, and with a teasing smile on his face Kenny pulled Maglor into a kiss, sharing her taste between them. Ali growled with frustration, ready to climb the walls at how hot they were, kissing. After the kiss their tongues rubbed together and Ali heard herself whimper, felt herself gush, almost undone by the sight of it. They dove back down and finished the job, Kenny's tongue on her clit, Maglor's tongue fucking her, bringing her to an explosive climax.

"That's one," Ali said. They crawled up and Kenny kissed her, then Maglor kissed her, then Kenny and Maglor kissed, and Ali was ready for another.

This time Ali rolled Kenny onto his back and climbed on his shoulders, sitting on his face, back to the wall, facing Maglor. Maglor sank down and Ali watched as Maglor took Kenny's cock in his mouth, sucking as Kenny lapped at her. When Kenny started to moan into her Ali moaned too, finding herself rocking her hips, fucking herself on his tongue, indescribably turned on by the sight of Maglor sucking Kenny's cock. Her excitement mounted as Maglor let the cock slip from his mouth and licked it, eyes locking with Ali's, knowing how much watching this turned her on. When Maglor started sucking at Kenny again, Kenny licked at Ali even faster, and soon she came again. As she gushed on Kenny's face, Kenny groaned and Maglor let out an "mmmmm", Kenny's seed seeping from the corners of his mouth.

They needed a little bit to recover after that; Ali lay between them. Then Ali looked over at Maglor, his cock hard and dripping precum. "Poor Maglor hasn't come yet," Ali said. She looked at Kenny and raised an eyebrow. "We should do something about that."

They got into a daisy chain - Kenny sucking Maglor's cock, Ali sucking Kenny as Maglor ate her. Even though Ali couldn't see what was going on as well this time, the way the two men moaned, and the thought of what it looked like, drove her right to that edge. Maglor came quickly, pent up, and hearing Maglor come, feeling him shake as he ate her, set Ali off, coming hard. A moment later Kenny came in her mouth and instead of swallowing it right away, Ali sat up and kissed Maglor, letting him taste.

They snuggled again, tangled up together in a cuddle-pile. *I could get used to this,* Ali thought to herself as she basked in the warm glow, feeling content... feeling safe. Remembering how good and safe Maedhros had felt, cuddled up with both of them long ago. It felt right, the three of them together again. Their love for each other had been strong enough to make a way back to each other. There was strength in that, power.

"I love both you guys," Ali said. But "love" didn't even feel like the right word. Something deeper.

Maglor began to rub Ali's belly, and Kenny's hand rested on top of Maglor's. Ali put her hand on top of Kenny's hand. She could *feel* that power between the three of them, a different kind of fire than what Fëanor and his brothers had, but still fire.

To light a flame is to cast a shadow. Ali shivered, hoping that was just her natural inclination towards pessimism - or as she liked to call it, realism, pragmatism - and wasn't her Force sense giving her a warning, like now that everything had fallen into place, it would soon come undone.

"We're going to be OK," Kenny said - ever the optimistic one of the two of them. He kissed her forehead. "We've got each other again."

Maglor stroked Kenny's cheek, and gave Ali a little kiss. "Our story isn't over yet."

Let's hope the next act doesn't have more tragedy. Ali wanted to believe, and in the light of Maglor's eyes - the hard-won peace radiating from him, after so long - she almost could.

Chapter 37

Sören's jaw dropped as the RV began rolling down the street of their destination and he looked out the window. He'd grown up in Akureyri and there were still farmers out there; Icelandic lamb was world-renowned. This was still like no sheep farm he'd ever seen back in Iceland. The sheep seemed to go on forever, bleating in surround sound.

The late afternoon light had that old gold quality as they got out of the RV. Sören had the baby sling and wheeled the stroller with one hand, carrying a cat carrier with the other, and walked slowly not just because of the load, but to drink everything in - the flat grassland, a gnarled tree here and there, the ranch-style house in the distance and a somewhat smaller one about a quarter of a kilometer away. Sören breathed in the scent of sheep and brush, his heart racing with anticipation at seeing family he'd never met, and family he hadn't seen in a long, long time.

A man began walking towards them - close to Maglor's height, with light brown skin, thick black locks to his waist, a goatee, and the same piercing grey eyes Ali had. Full lips, high cheekbones - he could have been a supermodel, and carried himself like a king. Sören felt almost intimidated by the huge biceps, the chiseled musculature showing through the man's T-shirt; the man looked like he could kill with his bare hands.

Ali started running towards him, immediately put him in a headlock, and started giving him noogies.

"Ali, *please,*" the man yelled.

Ali whooped with laughter. She wet her finger and stuck it in the man's ear, making him whine. He glowered when she let go, and then his face broke into a dazzling grin. He hugged Ali tight, looking over her at the others.

Kenny came over with Metallica and Megadeth. "It's good to see you again, man," Kenny said, giving him a hug. Then Metallica and Megadeth hugged him at the same time. "Uncle Darren!" they yelled. "Hi, Uncle Darren!"

Ali pulled the man forward by the hem of his shirt. "Everyone, this is my little brother Darren -"

"Do you *have* to bloody call me your little brother -"

"My little brother Darren," Ali repeated, louder; Sören snickered. Ali went on, "Darren, this is our cousin Sören and his partners Nicolaas, Marcus and Anthony... and this is our cousin Margrét and her partner Frankie."

"G'day, how do you do." Darren put out his hand for Sören to shake, and then he hugged Sören and clapped his back. Even immortal, Sören felt like the wind had been knocked out of him.

Darren hugged Margrét, and then proceeded to shake all the partners' hands. Sören was relieved that Darren didn't seem prejudiced against LGBT people and was very nonchalant about being surrounded by so many people in same-gender relationships, which was something he had worried about on the ride out to Ceduna. He didn't have

much blood family left, and being rejected by Darren the way his guardians had rejected him would have been devastating.

Darren looked down at the cat carrier Sören was holding; Dooku, Maglor and Anthony were also holding cat carriers. Huan was sitting next to Maglor, and Darren came over to let the dog sniff him, then gave him pats. "I should take you guys to the guest house so you can unload the critters -"

The door of the main house banged open and two people walked out. One was a short, plump woman with skin darker than Ali's and Darren's, hair in curls, wearing a forest green cardigan open over a beige T-shirt, and faded jeans. The other was a tall, muscular man with a weatherbeaten tanned, freckled and ruddy complexion, with grey eyes and long greying black hair that he had tied back in a long ponytail, and a long greying black beard that made him look like a Viking, wearing a burgundy bandana around his head, a denim jacket over a white T-shirt, and darker blue jeans. Sören's heart skipped a beat and his mouth opened again - he knew of course he would be seeing his uncle for the first time since he was a small child, but there he was in the flesh... his closest remaining link to his mother.

Before Sören could go to his uncle, or his uncle to him, Huan tore off the leash, which was extremely unlike him, and ran right over to Böðvar, yipping excitedly, tail wagging. Böðvar stooped to greet the dog, making the "come here" motion with his hands. "Hey, fella," Böðvar said. "Ain't you a good fella -"

Huan jumped on him, and even though Huan was a smaller dog and not that heavy, Böðvar still staggered a few steps as he caught the dog in his arms. Huan licked Böðvar's face like his life depended on it, and Böðvar laughed, ruffling the dog's fur. Maglor raised an eyebrow, and a frisson went down Sören's spine, his hair standing on end. This was definitely unusual for Huan, and it was if he was greeting a long-lost friend.

Could it be...? Sören didn't want to get his hopes up, didn't want to try to shoehorn Böðvar into "being somebody". But just the same...

"Jæja, he's very friendly," Böðvar said, walking the dog back over to Maglor. Then Böðvar looked at Sören, and at Margrét, and he swallowed hard, eyes tearing up. Sören's eyes misted too.

Böðvar pulled both Sören and Margrét into a hug, and now the older man did cry a little, though he tried to keep composed. "The last time I saw ya, you were this big," Böðvar said, a hand level with his waist. He rested a finger on Margrét's chin. "You look just like your mother." His eyes met Sören's. "And you are the spitting image of your father."

Then Böðvar looked at the woman with him and she stepped forward. "Where are my manners? This is your aunt Medika."

Medika hugged them both warmly, then proceeded to hug Frankie, Dooku, Maglor, and Anthony. "I've got tea waiting for you inside," Medika said.

"Let's get them situated first," Darren said, and Pumpkin yowled from inside her carrier as if to agree.

The guest house was a fixer-upper, as Ali had warned about, but it wasn't nearly as bad as Sören had envisioned - it seemed most of the way there to being acceptable to rent out for Airbnb, just a little more repairs and cosmetic touch-ups to go. The inside of the guest house had definitely been prettied up for their impending arrival - the living room

was done up in soft, muted blues, greens and greys, the colors of the sea, with an ocean waves wallpaper banner around the top of the wood-panel walls, a large squishy blue couch with a sky blue crocheted throw hanging on the back of it, grey armchairs, windchimes made of driftwood, seashells and seaglass. The bedrooms had the same grey-blue walls and one had steel blue bedding, one had navy blue bedding, and the one meant for the nursery had baby blues. The bathroom was done in light grey; Sören smiled at the old-fashioned bathtub with feet. Seeing him peek in, Darren said, "It takes a few minutes for the hot water heater to kick in, if there are any problems let me know."

There were already food and water dishes set up for the cats and Huan in the kitchen, which had the same light grey colors as the bathroom, but a hardwood floor instead of the bathroom's marbled grey linoleum tile. The kitchen was spotless, and someone had seen to it that the fridge was stocked with snacks and drinks, even beer, and the cupboards had some staples as well.

"We imagine you'd be eating with us but we wanted to make sure you had food on hand anyway," Darren said.

"*Takk*," Sören said.

The cats were let out of their carriers; Sören found a litterbox in the pantry where a washer and dryer was set up and there were some cleaning supplies and things like trash bags up on a high shelf. Rasputin nosed at the litterbox and promptly went, making Sören laugh. "Make yourself at home now," he said to the cat, like the cat understood him.

Dooku and Maglor put theirs and Sören's luggage in the bedroom with steel blue bedding, and Anthony rested his luggage on the couch. Anthony looked at the silver-and-blue analog clock ticking away on the kitchen wall. "I'll want to set up my tent before it gets dark, but I'll follow you out for tea," he said.

Maglor walked Huan over, who had been whining non-stop since they came in the guest house, as if to ask where Böðvar was. Sören chuckled at the way Huan perked up again, tongue lolling, tail wagging as they headed out towards the main house. Kate and Tori gurgled happily, and baby Søren woke up from his nap to smile.

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. The first thing Sören noticed as he walked in was a brightly multicolored crocheted throw on the brown couch. The next thing he noticed was a table full of sewing and knitting supplies and projects, with overflow throughout the rest of the living room, like a ball of lavender yarn and knitting needles with a partially knitted thing on the coffee table. Then there were the books. It looked like they had an entire library, with shelves all the way to the ceiling, taking up an entire wall of the living room and even a couple shelf units of books in the kitchen.

Böðvar brought out the tea service while Medika put her feet up and got back to her knitting. He let everybody fix their tea how they liked it, and before he drank, he raised his cup and said, "*Þegar þú ert hérna ertu fjölskylda. Og það er svo gott að finna fleiri fjölskyldumeðlimi.*" Then he gave a nervous chuckle and said in English, "Shit, I've been living in Australia so long that my Icelandic's rusty."

"*Íslenskan þín er fín*," Sören said. Now he observed that Böðvar's gruff voice carried a hybrid Icelandic-Australian accent when he spoke English, more Australian than Icelandic but with some notable Icelandic characteristics like speaking on the in-breath, a slightly rolled r. *I'm going to sound like him in five to ten years,*Sören thought to himself, once again feeling wistful and a slight bit angry that he couldn't go back to Iceland. But, knowing

he had family here in Australia made the prospect of staying here more comfortable.

"I hope the drive wasn't too terrible?" Böðvar asked.

"No," Ali said.

"Not at all," Maglor said. "It was less stressful than the time I drove across Canada."

Böðvar looked at Kate and Tori, and then at Sören. "Ali filled me in on some of what happened."

Sören nodded. He wondered what "some" meant, how much they knew. "Dag... disappeared."

"Do you think he was taken to, ah, exploit his scientific knowledge?" Böðvar raised an eyebrow. "Maybe one of his theories was a little too close to reality and somebody thought that needed to be suppressed?"

Sören looked at Anthony, and then gave Darren a wary look, not sure what was safe to mention around his cousin or not, since he didn't know much about Darren other than he had three kids and had been incarcerated for dealing drugs. As if Darren could sense Sören's reserve, he casually let his teacup float out of his hands onto the coffee table. *Yes, I'm like you,* he spoke into Sören's mind.

"Dag did that in public," Sören said.

"Yeh, I was afraid of that," Böðvar grumbled.

"It's safe to talk to us," Medika said. Then she looked Maglor in the eye. "It's safe to be yourself."

"How..." Maglor glanced at Ali. "Did you..."

"No," Ali said. "Mum just knows things."

Medika chuckled. "And when people are trying to hide something. Though that skill was put into regular use as a parent." She gave Ali and Darren a look, who both batted their lashes innocently, and then Medika chuckled again, before getting serious and giving Maglor a "go ahead" gesture. "Go on," she said. "It's all right."

Maglor took a deep breath and everyone watched as his glamour lifted, a silver glow surrounding him as his hair fell to his thighs, eyes flashing like labradorite, and he used the Force to tuck strands of hair behind his ears, revealing the pointy tips.

Darren spilled tea on himself, looking almost afraid. Medika smiled beautifully, nodding to encourage Maglor.

"*Huldufólk,*" Böðvar said, his voice hushed, eyes wide. "Brynhildur said she saw one when she was a little girl, at the Dimmuborgir. That wasn't you, though, you're not blond -"

"No, but I know who she saw," Maglor said; Sören sensed him bristling, Ingwion was still a sore subject. "He was... a kinsman, of sorts."

"I already know the gods are real," Böðvar said. "The entire reason why I'm in Australia is because Brynhildur told me to leave Iceland, after Sigurð died, after Odin killed him and

went after her."

"He told us about that," Ali said, and Darren nodded.

"I didn't want to believe it," Darren said, "but some guy tried to kill me in prison and said Odin sent him." Darren stood up and lifted up his shirt, revealing a ripped six-pack and a knife scar on his left side. "He just missed any vital organs." Darren sat down.

"I chose Australia because it was as far as I could go and still be on the same planet," Böðvar said. He frowned and added, "A bit too far."

"I know that had to be lonely, all the way across the world, so far from your family," Maglor said softly.

Böðvar nodded solemnly. "I've still kept in touch with Gitta. Though..." Böðvar scowled. "Few months ago, I got a visit from someone at MI6, telling me not to tell Gitta anything about you guys."

"I sent them," Anthony said. "Yes, I'm an agent, but I'm not here to spy, I'm here for recreational purposes." He grinned at Sören, then quickly sobered again. "When we relocated Sören, Nicolaas and Marcus from Akureyri to Sydney, we had to fake deaths as well. And we assume Gitta is under surveillance, though we do what we can with anything obvious. She can't know, in case our counter-surveillance fails and she ends up interrogated. Same with Ari. We'd thought about relocating them too but it would look suspicious if an entire family disappeared, so we let them live their lives... for now. But they both live in urban areas that are harder to stay on top of. Out here in the outback, it's a lot easier to take care of would-be observers who aren't us. Though... it seems like something takes care of that on its own, electronic equipment starts to act strangely closer to your property. A few drones have died coming in range."

"Yes," Medika said, with a cryptic little smile as she sipped her tea. "That means the ward is working as intended."

"One of her people's holy men came out and did a protection ritual on our land," Böðvar explained, "and each of our kids were warded as well, to keep evil eyes away. Though, that only held up through their younger years, and some of them still fell into trouble, different kind of evil."

"Yeh," Darren said. "Fell in with a bad crowd when I was younger. Made the wrong choices."

"I know a bit of what that's like," Maglor said.

Sören sighed, once again feeling guilty about what the Oath had cost his sons. Not guilty enough to go crawling back to the Valar - in the end he still held them responsible for Melkor's treachery and its consequences. *If they had kept him on a shorter leash none of that would have happened.*

"I'm not evil," Anthony said then, looking a bit taken aback at the implication that MI6 drones sent on his command were "evil eyes". "I'm on your side."

"You still work for the government," Böðvar said, giving him a stern look. "Britain isn't exactly the most innocent country in the world, with your past history of fucking colonialism -"

"OK, hey, *hey*," Ali said, putting her hands up. "Could we not."

It was Dooku who supplied levity this time. He glanced at Sören, trying to keep a straight face, but the corners of his eyes were crinkled with amusement. "If I didn't already know you and he were related, I would definitely have guessed it by now."

Sören snorted. Then Huan started barking, as if to agree, and went over to Böðvar for pettings. Another shiver went through Sören as he watched his uncle fuss over the dog. *You're not doing a great job of convincing me you're not Turcafinwë.*

"I'll try to behave," Böðvar said. He gave Anthony another look. "I'll try to not hold it against you that you work for a corrupt government that would still have an Empire if the bloody Americans weren't worse -"

"DA," Darren said, with a look of such exasperation on his face that it was comical and Sören had to stop himself from laughing. "*Da.* This is a family reunion, not Tumblr."

Böðvar looked genuinely confused. "What do polished rocks have to do with it?"

Sören had taken a sip of tea and almost ended up wearing it. He tried to keep his laughter contained. *In this family? Polished rocks have more to do with family reunions than you think.* In the pocket of his cargo pants, the Silmarils thrummed in their drawstring pouch.

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Usually Sören had a hard time sleeping in a new place, but to his pleasant surprise he was able to fall asleep that night without much effort. It helped that the two-day RV trip had been exhausting - nice scenery, but Sören hadn't slept well in the cramped RV, where he'd opted to sleep, thinking his kids were safer there than in a tent. It also helped that the rest of his first evening at his uncle's farm had been pleasant - there was "shrimp on the barbie" and sausage sizzles, and Anthony and Böðvar got past the initial wrong foot when Böðvar noticed him looking at the book selection, and they discussed literature.

But Sören knew it wasn't just that - it was feeling like he'd come home. Even though he'd only been reunited with his uncle for a short while and didn't know him well, there was still a sense of familiarity with him. Böðvar had given him another hug before he went to the guest house for the night, and it was like hugging a piece of his mamma. Böðvar knew how horrible Sören's father's sister had been, and Sören could feel the regret of not having fought harder for a place in his sister's children's lives, though Sören didn't hold it against him. Sören didn't know until his uncle gave him that tight hug, how much he'd been missing the sense of family. He had been in a self-contained bubble with his partners and his cousin and his sister for so long. That warm, safe feeling that he was with family again, he was *home*, helped soothe him to sleep.

Baby Søren woke him up in the middle of the night, squalling. "I can see to him if you want," Maglor said when Sören stirred awake.

"No, it's OK," Sören mumbled. "I'll get it." While Sören appreciated Maglor and Dooku's help with the kids, he didn't want to make them do everything. Inconvenience or not, this was his child by blood and his responsibility.

It was also an excuse to marvel once again at the little wonder he had created*My magnum opus*, Sören thought to himself as he brought little Søren from the crib to the

changing station in the room that had been set up as a nursery. As grumpy as he was about having been woken up from a sound sleep, he couldn't be angry with the baby for it, especially not when the baby smiled at him like that. After the baby was freshly changed Sören sat with the baby for awhile, rocking him, feeling love so fierce he felt like he could break. When Sören tucked the baby back in his crib he spent a few minutes just watching him sleep, sweet and precious; the baby curled a fist around Sören's index finger and silent tears spilled down Sören's cheeks.

He checked in on Kate and Tori and took a moment to watch them, too, smiling through his tears at how adorable they looked. He blew kisses before he left the nursery.

He thought about getting back in bed, but the act of changing his son's diaper had woken him up too much and he didn't want to lie there awake and fidget and toss and turn, which would disturb Dooku. Sören decided to step outside and look at the stars. There was very little light pollution out here, and a shiver went through Sören as he looked up at the sea of stars, the Milky Way visible over the fields. No matter how many times he'd seen a clear night sky it still amazed him, feeling awed and humbled. As much pain as he'd known in his life, he'd made it through for moments like *this*, to see something so beautiful.

Some would say being reborn as mortal is a curse, but times like this, I have the last laugh.

Sören thought about heading over to Anthony's tent, then thought better of surprising and probably startling a trained killer who was likely already vigilant with whatever dangerous creatures could be out and trying to get into his tent, like scorpions. He sat on the back porch steps and looked up at the sky, and then he noticed movement with an LED flashlight. At closer look, Frankie was taking a walk.

"Hey," Sören called out, trying not to be too loud and wake anyone in the houses. "Pssst. Frankie."

Frankie shone the flashlight in his direction and then up at herself and waved. When the flashlight shone back at him, Sören made the "come here" gesture.

Frankie walked over, and sat next to him on the steps.

"Did the baby wake you up?" Sören asked.

Frankie shook her head. "No. He woke you up?"

Sören nodded.

"I've been out here for a bit," Frankie said. "I had a dream about, uh." She frowned. "The Helcaraxë. So I decided to go for a little stroll, since this landscape is pretty different from that."

Sören sighed, put an arm around her, and kissed her cheek. Once again, he felt a twinge of guilt for what his family had endured - while still believing that rebelling against the Valar had been, and still was, the correct decision. Nonetheless, he knew the ordeal on the Helcaraxë had been traumatic, and he ached that it still haunted the nightmares of those he loved.

And he did love Frankie, still. He took her hand. He had thought they were over when they went on their break a couple months ago, but he couldn't deny that he still loved her, and he had been willing to give a relationship with Anthony a chance... it was only fair to

allow that for Frankie, as well. "I miss you," he said.

"I miss you too." Frankie booped his nose. "I've been wondering how you were doing."

"Oh, you know." Sören shrugged. "The usual angst."

"I hear you and Anthony finally..."

"Yeah, we finally." Sören exhaled. "He knows who he is."

"Our baby brother."

Sören nodded. "It feels like... you know, the last pieces are falling into place, with whoever else is out there. Arafinwë. Curufin." *Probably Turcafinwë. I wonder if Darren is anyone, or Medika.* "I found the third Silmaril."

"Good," Frankie said.

"But... there's still something missing." Sören's heart beat a little faster, nervous about what he was going to say, but he had to say it anyway. He took Frankie's chin and turned her face to his. "You. I love you. That hasn't changed."

Frankie said nothing, but her eyes misted.

"Look." Sören took a deep breath. "I know that my worrying gets to you, and I... I can't promise that I won't worry. I'll try not to treat you like a porcelain doll who needs to live in a bubble - I remember when you kicked Justin Roberts's ass."

"Too bad I didn't get to do it again before he died." Frankie sneered. Then her face softened and she took Sören's hand.

"So long as I'm immortal, and you're mortal, yes, I'm going to worry. It's in my nature. Truth be told, I'd probably still worry about you if we were both immortal, I'm, you know, a mother hen. But... I'm not going to push you away." Sören sighed. "Anthony went away to England for a month after the Finarfin bomb dropped, and I kept wondering whether or not he would come back. Missing him like crazy. I realized that I'd rather have however many years I'm going to get with him - five, ten, twenty, fifty - than push him away. And the same goes for you. It's going to hurt like hell to lose you, but it's going to hurt even more if we just... end things now, if I hurt you because I walk away, if I keep missing you and wondering about the what ifs and what could have beens. Twenty years, forty years, is still time. It's still something. So if you're willing to deal with me sometimes worrying about you... I want to do this. I still want you in my life, I still want you -"

Frankie grabbed Sören and kissed him hard.

The fire in that kiss made Sören's cock stiffen. He kissed her back with months of pent-up passion, the love he could not deny, fueling a fierce hunger. When the kiss broke they looked into each other's eyes for a moment, then Frankie rose and grabbed Sören, pulling him to his feet. Sören laughed, even more delighted as Frankie began shoving him towards the door, and inside.

At this hour there was no one in the living room. They got on the couch together and for a few minutes they just held each other. Sören pet Frankie's hair, comforted by the lush curves against him, good to snuggle up with. When she looked up at him, he leaned in for another kiss. They kissed and kissed, deeply, fiercely. Frankie began to grind against the

hard bulge tenting Sören's pajama bottoms and Sören groaned, moving his lips from Frankie's mouth to her neck, kissing, licking, nibbling. Frankie moaned and Sören put a finger to her lips. "We have to be quiet," he whispered.

Frankie nodded, and then, mischief in her eyes, she drew Sören's finger into her mouth and sucked on it.

That did it. Sören felt like a man possessed, like he was in heat. He reached for the hem of her camisole and before he could pull it off himself, she took care of it, and Sören sighed at the sight of her breasts, nipples hard. "You're beautiful," he husked, cupping her breasts with his hands.

Frankie leaned up and cradled Sören's head. "Go on," she whispered. Sören licked at a nipple and Frankie gasped. When his tongue swirled around the nipple Frankie let out a whimper and Sören covered her mouth. She sucked on his fingers again as he suckled the nipple, his cock throbbing with lust. He lapped at the nipple again before turning his head to the other, licking the hard nub, brushing his tongue around it, suckling, pulling on it with his lips. He went back and forth between them, thumb and index finger pinching and rubbing one as his lips and tongue worked on the other, Frankie panting, clutching at his head, tugging on his curls.

Sören's cock was aching, but as far as he knew Frankie wasn't on any kind of birth control, and he couldn't have a vasectomy because of the way the physiological changes with his immortality had given him speed healing, which would interfere with surgery. In any case, he wanted to taste her, it had been too long. Frankie got up and dropped her pajama bottoms, and when she sat back on the couch, Sören got on his knees beside the couch and gently guided her to lay down.

He started kissing her breasts again, then kissed and licked up her throat to kiss her mouth, his fingers walking down her chest to her stomach and over her mound. He worked his way down, kissing the hollow between her breasts, kissing and licking her stomach, kissing, licking and nibbling one thigh, then the other. His finger brushed around and around her clit in slow, lazy circles, not touching it directly, just teasing. She was already very wet, and as she watched, he brought his finger to his mouth to taste her juices.

He resumed kissing her thighs, getting closer and closer. At last he began kissing her petals, sucking on them, teasing them with slow strokes of his tongue before sucking some more. His tongue circled her clit as his finger had done, and then he began to lick it slowly, cock jolting as she gasped and quivered. Frankie panted as his tongue rubbed slowly, and his fingers played inside her, slowly moving in and out, making wet sloppy noises. When he began licking faster, he stuck his slick fingers in her mouth to muffle her moans. He sucked on her clit, slurping at her dripping juices, and couldn't help touching himself, completely turned on. A few minutes later he licked again, fast then slow, then faster, and then he sucked at her harder, shaking his head as he sucked, growling into her. Frankie rocked her hips, fucking herself on his mouth, and he felt her tensing, heard her shuddery gasps, until her eyes widened and she smiled before giving a deep sigh, her body shaking. The feel of her contracting against his lips made Sören crazy, and he lapped up the gushing juices.

He ate her to a second climax, then a third, and as she came the third time she squirted a little and that set Sören off, coming with a soft cry as he lapped like he was drinking from a fountain. Frankie squirted again as she watched Sören come, and she pulled his cum-soaked fingers to her mouth, licking and sucking them clean, licking her lips to savor the taste of him. Sören groaned as they kissed, and then he climbed up on the couch and

pulled her close.

Cuddling together as the orgasm ebbed, giving way to glowy, warm bliss, was just what they needed. "I love you," Sören whispered into her hair, before kissing the top of her head. Frankie tilted her face up and they rubbed noses before a sweet, lingering kiss.

Frankie rested her head against Sören's chest, and he knew she was listening to his heartbeat. "I worry about you too," she said finally.

Sören laughed a little. "I mean, I'm immortal -"

"I don't mean about you physically dying." Frankie put her hand on his heart. "I worry about you here. I worry about... history repeating itself. You going mad again." Frankie frowned, and kissed the tip of his nose. "We all have to stick together this time, OK? None of that pushing us away shit. That's what they want, is divide and conquer."

Sören tousled her hair. He needed a moment of levity - she'd hit a nerve with her words. "The only pushing I'll do is... pushing it real good."

Frankie giggled, snorted, and swatted him. "Next time."

Chapter 38

It felt like old times as Ali walked with her father, watching her father's sheepdog Auli herd the sheep. But now old times were made new - Sören was with them, taking it all in as if sheep herding were the most amazing thing he'd ever seen in his life.

When the sheep were grazing in another part of the field, Böðvar whistled and Auli came bounding back.

"You have a nice dog," Sören said, stooping to pet him, smiling as Auli put his front paws on his shoulders and started licking his face. "Sometimes we think about getting a friend for Huan."

"We're going to end up with seven cats and three or four dogs," Ali said, chuckling.

"Nothing wrong with that," Böðvar said. He gave Auli some pets when Auli came back to him. "I was worried he would get jealous what with your dog loving up on me so much, but it's already like they're old friends. I found them taking a nap together, cuddling."

"AWWWWWWWWWWWWWWWW," Ali and Sören said in unison. Ali thought she could die of the cuteness of that mental image.

Böðvar grinned. Then he winced a little, as they started moving again.

"You all right?" Ali asked.

Böðvar nodded. "Yeh, I'll be all right. Shoulda brought my cane, is all."

Sören frowned - Ali could feel his concern. "He's got arthritis," Ali explained.

"Ah," Sören said, nodding. "That sucks. Nico had it too before -" Then Sören clapped a hand over his mouth, aware he was getting into stuff they normally didn't share with outsiders.

Böðvar raised an eyebrow. "Before what?"

"He's like us," Ali reminded her cousin. "He knows about some of the problems our family has. It's OK to tell him."

Sören took a deep breath. "The *huldufólk* my mamma saw when she was a little girl... I met him a couple years ago, and he, ah. Well, he wasn't just any Elf, but he was Freyr, and he made me and Nico immortal."

There was a long silence, with Böðvar not reacting, and for a minute Ali worried it had in fact been a mistake to tell him, even with what Böðvar knew. But then Böðvar just nodded and said, "I see. So Odin wants to kill us, but Freyr made you immortal?"

"Apparently there's bad blood," Sören said with a shrug. "Anyway... I'm not on speaking terms with him now, or I would ask him if, you know, he could do anything for you."

"I don't want to live forever," Böðvar said, shaking his head. "The world has already changed enough in my lifetime. I'm not sure it's going to change for the better, and I don't want to be around to see that. It's a nice thought, though, you're a good kid."

Sören chuckled. "I'm gonna be thirty-seven next month, I'm not a kid."

"I'm at that age where anyone under forty is a kid," Böðvar said. "Besides, you're my sister's son, you'll still be a kid to me when you're eighty." Then Böðvar's eyebrows shot up. "Shit, when you're eighty are you going to... look eighty, or?"

Sören shook his head. "I stopped aging just before my thirty-fifth birthday, which was when Freyr made me immortal. I started getting a few grey hairs in my early thirties, you can't really tell, but it didn't reverse the aging process, it just stopped it. I don't age anymore and I can't get sick with human illnesses. I can still die, if I get severely injured, but that's harder to do."

Böðvar nodded, looking deep in thought. They walked a few more paces, and Böðvar made a hand gesture at Auli, where Auli ran back out to move the sheep along to another part of the field. Then Böðvar took a deep breath and asked, "Marcus isn't a god, is he?"

"No," Sören said, and then, "Almost." Ali heard the unvoiced *not yet.*

"That's... not his real name, is it?"

"Maglor," Sören said. "Technically, Macalaurë or Kanafinwë."

"Hm," Böðvar said. "That sounds familiar and I can't for the life of me figure out why."

"You have a huge library, you ever read *The Silmarillion*?"

"Ah, no. Well... let me rephrase that." Böðvar scowled. "I have a copy of it, but I was only able to get partway through it before I gave up."

"All the thee-eths and thou-eths?" Ali smirked.

"Not even that, though now that you mention it, it read a little too much like the Bible for my comfort. No, it was... I started getting *angry*. I don't know how to explain it, it just pissed me right off. That was a long time ago, I barely remember what I was reading, but I remember the anger."

Ali and Sören exchanged amused glances. *Are you thinking what I'm thinking?* Sören asked.

Ali shivered and saw her arms breaking out into gooseflesh; it was a warm spring day. Before Ali could respond, her father went on, "Now *The Lord of the Rings*, I loved that, I've read the trilogy at least a dozen times... and *The Hobbit* book was all right, if a bit boring." Then Böðvar froze and his eyes widened, realizing why the subject had come up. "Wait. *Maglor.* Are you... trying to tell me that -"

Sören nodded. "It's complicated, but yeah, Tolkien's fiction wasn't... entirely fictional."

Böðvar's jaw dropped. "You're taking the piss, right?"

"No," Sören said. "Wish I were."

Böðvar exhaled sharply. He looked out at the sheep grazing in the field, and Auli supervising, looking pleased with himself. Ali could feel the weight of their conversation crashing down on her father, splintering his reality - he already knew about things like the

gods, the portals... this was something else entirely. Ali put a hand on her father's shoulder, and had a memory flash of Maedhros putting a hand on Celegorm's shoulder when they received news of their father's banishment to Formenos, knowing how lonely and isolated it would be if they followed, but still willing to go, to stand together.

Böðvar blinked slowly. "All right," he said, nodding slowly as if he accepted what he was being told, though there was an edge to his voice that suggested he didn't like it much - Ali couldn't blame him. Then Böðvar gruffed, "If you don't mind me asking, how did you get mixed up with the *huldufólk*... Quendi... whatever the fuck you call them... anyway?"

Sören chuckled and Ali laughed a little too. It also occurred to Ali that Sören and her father were a lot alike, and she remembered from her days as Maedhros that although Curufin had been "Junior" and carried on in the family tradition of smithing, it had been Celegorm who was most like Fëanor in terms of personality and temperament. Instead of retreating to a forge, Celegorm had the forest. It made an intuitive sense that a reborn Celegorm would want to be out in nature and surround himself with animals, like her father had done. She didn't want to get her hopes up and try to force a connection that wasn't there, but it seemed rather obvious now.

Sören quickly sobered - the question about how he'd gotten "mixed up" with the Eldar was a difficult one, and Sören said, "It's complicated."

"Yeh, I bet it is." Böðvar narrowed his eyes again. "Before you leave, you're gonna tell me."

"I will," Sören said, "but not now. Besides..." He looked Böðvar up and down, and Ali glanced over and noticed her father was starting to limp a little. "You should go inside and take a load off for a bit, já?"

"In awhile," Böðvar said, with a scowl - Ali knew that even though her father acknowledged arthritis was slowing him down enough to enlist Darren's help on the farm, it was still a sore spot for him.

"No, *now*," Sören said, watching Böðvar wince as he took another step. Sören put his hands on his hips and said, "*Ekki láta mig fokking bera þig inn, því ég mun gera það.*"

Ali didn't speak much Icelandic but she got the gist that Sören was threatening to carry him inside. Böðvar rolled his eyes and said, "*Já, móðir.*" Then in English, he added, "I'll go inside and sit after Darren gets here to relieve me."

"OK, well, where is he?" Sören asked. "In the house?"

Ali looked up at the bright blue sky, with just a few wispy clouds. "No, I know where."

–

On the opposite end of her parents' property there was a long cable. Darren was wearing a white tank top and faded jeans, hair tied back, and was walking along the other side of it to retrieve something... a javelin.

Sören's eyebrows went up. "I'd been wondering what that wire was for. I thought it was for the sheep."

"No," Ali said.

Darren came around and walked towards them, javelin in hand. "Hey," he said.

"Hi," Ali said.

"Da need me to go out and mind the sheep?"

Ali nodded. "His arthritis is a bit dodgy today, and he didn't bring his cane."

"Christ, I'm gonna have to have another talk with him about using his bloody cane." Darren shook his head. "Fucking pride. He thinks it makes him look 'old'."

Ali snorted. "He *is* old."

"Right. But in his mind, he's still stuck in the 80s. I mean, it's good that he's a cool old guy who likes his metal and still rides his Harley but he needs to stop acting like he's invincible."

"Easier said than done. Da is a bit stubborn."

"A bit. That's like saying he owns a bit of sheep, or Everest is a bit tall." Holding his javelin like a staff, Darren gestured to each of them. "You mind if I do one more throw before I take over for him?"

"Nah," Ali said. "Go ahead."

"Yeah, I want to watch. I've never seen javelin throwing before," Sören said.

"No? They'd not had it in school sports over in Iceland? You've never watched the Olympics?" Darren gave him an incredulous look.

Sören gave a sheepish little smile. "I, ah. Was born without the sports gene."

"I see. Well then... if this is your first time watching javelin throwing, I should make it really count." Darren grinned, and then he turned his back.

Ali and Sören watched as Darren got in the throwing stance, and Darren aimed, then hurled the javelin over the cable. The javelin went impressively far - Sören let out a low whistle - before it hit the ground. Ali clapped excitedly - she loved watching Darren throw.

"I'm no expert but that was *deadly*," Ali said.

"It wasn't bad," Darren said, smiling. "All right, Da needs me, I can... leave that there for now." He stretched and flexed, and began to walk with Sören and Ali.

As they walked across the fields, Sören looked deep in thought. Ali still felt a sense of exhilaration at watching her brother javelin throwing again, after so long, and she decided to say something encouraging. "It's nice to see that you've gotten back into it," Ali said. "That you're not bitter and put off to it."

Now Sören looked confused, and Darren explained, "Before I went to jail, I was a serious contender for representing Australia in the Olympics. Big deal in and of itself, bigger because of Aboriginal representation..."

Sören nodded.

"But..." Darren took a deep breath. "I'm not sure the Olympic Committee would want someone who's done time on drug charges to go back on Team Australia. Anyway, it's been a long time and my priorities have changed. It's a hobby now, not a career goal."

"It's still a good hobby," Sören said. "Looks like a good upper body workout too. I'm not a sports person, like I said, but I run and do Krav Maga and I po-" Sören stopped himself, looking off to the side.

"You..." Darren prompted him to finish.

"I pole dance." Sören turned beetroot.

Ali snickered - she wasn't used to seeing Sören, of all people, be self-conscious about something that was often interpreted in a sexualized way, but she had a feeling he didn't want to weird Darren out. To her relief, Darren was very nonchalant about it.

"Ah," Darren said. "I hear that takes a lot of physical strength."

"I've definitely gotten stronger the last few months," Sören said, nodding. "It's just something I do for exercise, it's, ah. It's not professional. I have a pole set up where I exercise at home..."

"Well, if you want, I can show you how to throw a javelin before you leave here," Darren said. "I will warn you though if you've never done it before you might be a bit sore the next day, because it's not just an upper body workout, you throw the javelin with your entire body."

"I'd like to learn," Sören said. "Then when I come to visit you might have someone to compete with."

Darren smiled. "All right."

"I'm curious," Sören said, looking thoughtful again. "How did you get into javelin throwing? I know I'm not a sports guy but it still doesn't seem like a very common thing."

"It's not," Darren said. Then he chuckled with a little eyeroll - now he looked self-conscious.

"I'm curious too," Ali said. "You never told me why you took it up, either."

"You never asked," Darren said.

"True." Ali nodded. "But still..."

"OK... this is going to sound completely daft, even by our standards of daft." Darren took a deep breath. He looked down, then looked up. "When I started to hit puberty - around eleven, twelve - I had some strange dreams. I was... some sort of king, or something. Fighting with a spear." Darren scowled. "The dreams got grisly, I was fighting this evil, nasty guy, and I... I got severe burns, I died from them. I remember that pretty vividly."

Sören's jaw dropped. Ali's hair stood on end. Ali could practically see the gears turning in Sören's head, making the connection.

*Gil-galad was an Elven-king, of him the harpers sadly sing.*Ali's mouth went dry.

"Fucking mad, right?" Darren gave a nervous laugh. "Anyway, even though it was just dreams, I still got it into my head as a teenager that I should take up the spear. Big brain logic here, 'maybe if I throw it instead of fighting melee, I won't get mortally wounded if I'm up against that sort of shit again.'" Darren tapped his temple. "And I told myself it was daft, just dreams, I wouldn't be in that sort of position in reality, I'm just this guy who lives in the outback..."

"...But you know about the problems our family has," Sören said. "We're on Odin's shit list. And not just him."

"I don't get that," Darren said. "I believe it, I just... don't understand why -"

"It's a long story," Sören said. They were getting closer to where Böðvar was watching the sheep now, a few more meters to go. "Long and complicated."

"Well, I think I've a right to know," Darren said, giving him a challenging look. He raised an eyebrow. "Those dreams aren't just dreams, are they?"

"No," Sören said. "They're not."

Ali had a lump in her throat now, unshed tears stinging her eyes. Fingon had wanted a child more than anything, and Maedhros had resented that he couldn't give that to him, and even though Maedhros knew Fingon was wedding a womb and did not love the woman, he still felt bitter about it. His bitterness faded at the adorable Gil-galad, who had been such a light in their lives. Ali knew now that her protectiveness towards Darren wasn't just the natural protectiveness of an older sibling towards a younger - Ali had maternal instincts towards her brother; Gil-galad had been like Maedhros's child, too.

Ali paused and gave Darren a fierce, tight hug. Darren squeezed her. "What's that for?" Darren asked, knowing it wasn't just a random hug.

"You being you," Ali said - that was both the full truth and only a partial truth. She clapped him on the back and they made their way to Böðvar. "We'll talk later, OK?"

"We better," Darren said, giving her a stern look, then a little smile. "Should I go to town and get popcorn?"

"I think it requires an entire field of corn," Ali quipped.

—

That evening there was grilled lamb chops and grilled corn on the cob, with Maglor and Dooku handling the grill outside; Ali, Kenny, Darren, Böðvar and Sören worked in the kitchen to make a potato salad and a garden salad.

"You look like that cucumber personally offended you," Böðvar said, watching Sören chop with an intense scowl on his face.

"Just thinking," Sören said.

"About Odin?"

"That, and... other things." Sören sighed and put down the knife. He leaned against the sink counter. "*Móðurbróðir*... do you ever have strange dreams?"

Darren put down his own knife and gave Sören a look of alarm. Sören glanced at him, and then back at Böðvar. Ali's heart beat faster and she swallowed hard. *Here we go,* she thought, bracing herself.

"Yeh, I've..." Böðvar chuckled. "Define strange. Like do you mean the time I dreamed I was on one of those idol shows dressed up like a toothbrush, or..."

"Recurring dreams," Sören said. "Especially if they feel more intense, more real, than your usual dreams."

"Jæja. I dream about hunting," Böðvar said. "Being a sort of wild man, wandering the forest with a big wolfhound-looking dog. Sometimes he talks." Böðvar laughed. "That's crazy, innit?"

"Remember how I asked you if you'd read *The Silmarillion*?" Sören pursed his lips. "And you made the connection it isn't just fictional? You're in it." Sören gave Darren a pointed look. "So are you."

"That's..." Darren scowled. "That's a story about Elves, right? I know Elves are real..." Darren looked out at where Maglor was at the grill. "But we..." Darren gestured with his hand from his chest down to his stomach. "I'm not an Elf."

"You were," Sören said. "We all were, or... most of us, anyway. Look, I want to show you something." Sören made a "wait here" gesture and then he went out the back door. Ali watched as he strode across the field to the guest house. *He's getting the Silmarils,* Ali realized.

Now Kenny stopped stirring the potato salad. "So wait, hold up." Kenny looked at Böðvar, then at Ali. "It's pretty obvious he's Celegorm, but..." Kenny looked at Darren. Then his mouth opened and Ali knew he'd got it. "Oh my god." Kenny facepalmed. "You... the javelin... you're Gil."

"I'm what now?" Darren's eyes narrowed.

Kenny put his arms around Darren and started crying.

With a confused look on his face, Darren patted Kenny's back and hesitantly put his arms around his brother-in-law-to-be. "What's going on here?"

Sören came back in; Kenny stepped back and stood beside Ali. Sören opened the drawstring pouch he was carrying, and the Silmarils lifted out, blindingly bright, casting rainbows all over the kitchen walls and ceiling. Böðvar gasped, and Darren made a feral noise. Kenny took Ali's hand and squeezed. Ali's eyes teared up - it was a miracle to see all three Silmarils, and for none of them to give her pain.

"That's your proof," Sören said. "The Silmarils the book was named for. Those were mine, and they are mine."

"You... you were Fëanor," Böðvar said, his voice hushed.

"The reason why you got angry reading the Silm, angry enough to stop reading, and didn't

understand why... is because of how our family was slandered, maligned, denigrated in the text," Sören said. "Because of how the Valar punished us, our entire bloodline, for some of us rebelling, like an abuser punishes an abuse victim for standing up for themselves. And not just in this lifetime. At least some of us were reborn as human, and we found our way back to each other, but most of us went through hell to get here." Sören put the Silmarils back in the pouch, and put them in the cargo pocket of his black trousers. "The reason why we're on Odin's shit list is because Fenrir and Fëanor are one and the same. The Valar sold Fëanor's mother, Miriel, to Odin to serve as one of his Valkyries. She finally stood against him and when she reincarnated as human, as my mother in this lifetime, he killed her. He knows for that alone, never mind everything else, I'm coming for him."

"That still doesn't explain why he has a vendetta against the entire family," Darren said. "Why a man tried to kill me, claiming Odin sent him."

"Because he knows what family means to me," Sören said. "He knows the best way to demoralize me is to pick my family off one by one."

"It still feels like more than that." Darren narrowed his eyes.

Sören nodded. "You may be onto something there, but regardless... the Doom of the Valar is still upon us, and the Valar are letting Odin help, I guess."

"*Fokking helvíti.*" Böðvar sat down.

Ali put a hand on her father's shoulder; if he was swearing in Icelandic, it was bad.

Maglor stuck his head in the back door. "Stuff on the grill is ready." Then he frowned. "Oh dear. Is everything OK?"

"No," Sören said. "But it will be, if I have anything to do with it." He dropped to his knees in front of his uncle, and put his hands on Böðvar's shoulders. "I want to believe that we have a chance, with all of us together again. That we can keep the gods from continuing to interfere with us, hurt us, so long as we stand together. Our paths crossed for a reason."

Darren folded his arms. "Not to be a downer, but how do you know that reason wasn't so they could slaughter all of us at once?"

Sören got up. His mouth opened, like he was going to say something, then he closed it.

"Even if that's so," Ali said, and she hoped like hell it wasn't, "we should... we should celebrate. That's not the only thing we have to celebrate, anyway." She finally showed off the ring on her finger. "Kenny and I are getting married."

"Good," Darren said, giving her a hug, then giving Kenny a hug too.

"Yes, very good." Böðvar nodded and sighed - trying to smile, but distress in his eyes; Ali sensed he was taking Darren's suspicion to heart. "I agree, we should do something special. Not tomorrow, though, that's your mum's birthday."

Ali looked at Sören. "What about the ninth? That day has bad associations for you... well, for quite a few of us..." Ali shivered, remembering the horrible dreams of annihilation, that she now knew weren't just dreams, she had felt all of them, and herself, die in another universe. "We could reclaim it, make it a happy day." *Let our enemies know we're not*

afraid. Even though Ali was, in fact, afraid. She remembered Sauron all too well. Knew what he was capable of. Just thinking of him made her skin crawl.

"You're on," Sören said. "In the meantime..." He added the cucumbers to the salad, and began tossing it. "Let's eat."

The sun was setting in shades of dusky blue, pink, and gold, which was nice when they were eating at picnic tables outside, relaxing after the ordeal of the revelation. Good food with family helped reinforce the feeling that it was a good thing they were together again.

Even though Ali knew they were having corn, now she laughed to herself as she made the connection with what she'd said earlier. "I see you got close to an entire field of corn," she said to her brother.

Darren grinned. "I don't half-arse anything."

Then Sören started laughing too, and gave Anthony a mischievous little smirk. Anthony narrowed his eyes. "What?"

"I don't think you can eat this," Sören said, gesturing to the tray of grilled corn on the cob. "It's cannibalism. You might get mad corn disease."

"His given name is Cornelius," Ali explained to her family. "Anthony is his middle name."

"Yes, *thank you* for sharing that," Anthony said, giving her a look, then he picked a cherry tomato out of his salad and threw it at Sören, who caught it in his mouth.

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Later that night, after the kids were put to bed, Ali and Kenny lay there, just holding each other.

Crying, though they tried to keep it down. There was joy, and a feeling of relief, at being reunited with more of their own - Celegorm, Gil-galad.

But what Darren had said, was weighing on Ali. She knew divide and conquer was a strategy of their enemies - it had worked beautifully after the Helcaraxë. While she didn't mind being human - she loved Australia, she loved being a mother - she wondered from time to time if they might all still be alive, in their original Elven forms, had they stuck together. If they would have, in time, defeated the Valar, Sauron, and Morgoth. If none of the gods who preyed on humanity would rise, if Elves and Men were allied as equals, rather than Men seeing themselves as subservient and inferior to Powers.

And now she wondered if, not splitting apart after the exile and Doom, they would have been easier to destroy. She knew Fëanor had told Finarfin to go back to Aman for the sake of his children, their bloodline. If Finarfin had resisted... would they still all have died?

Ali didn't like the thought that they had been given a hope spot, a moment of reconciliation and rejoicing, just to have it taken away... that part of the Doom was, in fact, to be sundered over and over again. Ali knew that short of a miracle, she wouldn't live forever, and Sören-Fëanor would have to watch her die. The thought of being reborn and finding him again, and him watching that death again... and again...

The pit of Ali's stomach rose. *What if Ingwion gave them immortality not as a gift, but as a curse? For Sören and Nicolaas's relationship to break down with despair as everyone dies over and over, for Fëanor to lose Fingolfin again? What if Freyr was never actually on their side?*

That seemed a bit paranoid, but Ali remembered Maedhros's torture. Things too graphic for the book - even more than the rapes and the beatings, it was Sauron pretending to free him, or telling him he saw rescue coming, and it turning out to be a lie, that scarred Maedhros's mind. The loss of hope, the pretense of safety, was one of the best ways to break someone.

Ali sobbed into the pillows, not wanting to wake the rest of the house. She tried to shield herself, not wanting her children to sense the anguish pouring out of her. Kenny rubbed her back, making soothing noises.

"I promise you," Kenny choked out through his own tears, "nothing is going to tear us apart again." He took Ali's hand, kissed it and squeezed it. "We're going to get through this. We will find a way to stay together. We will have a *good life*."

"I want to believe you," Ali wept. "I don't want to go through all *that* a second time. But what if Darren is right. What if..."

There was a quiet knock on their door. Ali reached out with the Force and smelled petrichor, sea salt, heard faraway harp strings. "Come in, Káno," she said.

Maglor opened the door and walked in slowly, using the Force to gently close the door behind him. "I... sensed distress. Sören and Nicolae told me it was OK to check on you."

Ali sat up and rubbed her face. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to bother you or interrupt -"

"You're not a bother." Maglor sat on the edge of the bed. He took Ali's hand in one hand, and Kenny's in the other. "I imagine you must have a lot of intense and complicated emotions, knowing two more family members are among us."

"Yeh, that's one way of putting it," Ali said.

"She's worried that we're going to go through hell a second time," Kenny said. "An understandable fear, after everything, but..."

"Very understandable." Maglor slid back on the bed on the other side of Ali, and she was sandwiched between them, held against Maglor's chest as Kenny spooned her, arms encircling her from behind. "You're still traumatized from back then."

"I've had a pretty happy life here so far," Ali said. "Great parents. Yeh, I dealt with some racist bullshit in school, the occasional arsehole here and there... it was painful when two of my brothers went to jail... but there was never really that sense that maybe things could get worse, *a lot worse*, until Dag disappeared. Feeling like I've been dragged into a conflict bigger than myself, bigger than all of us. We couldn't stop them *then*, and we were immortal. What if -"

"What if we know what to expect, and we try to avoid the mistakes we made the first time? We use our knowledge of our enemies' strengths and weaknesses... we use our *anger*." Kenny's arms tightened around her.

"This family, collectively, is like a starving dog that's been locked up in doggie jail and suddenly it's let out and smells fresh meat," Maglor said. "The ancient völva seeing Fëanor as a wolf is... apt."

"Yeh." Ali sighed. "Again, I want to believe -"

"I know, my dear." Maglor kissed her brow. His eyes were sad, and Ali reached up to touch his face, knowing how well Maglor knew, *feeling* that loss of hope, dying inside over the eons. "I won't give you any platitudes. All I can say is that... we are here now. Maybe we will succeed in taking down the evil that has harmed us. But we're not just here for vengeance. We're here for healing, and I understand that need *very* intimately. We have to take what comfort we can get, while we're here." He pulled Ali's head against his shoulder and pet her locks, massaged her scalp. "Right here, right now, you're safe in our arms. Sauron is far away."

"We're together again," Kenny said. He took an arm that was around Ali, and reached out to touch Maglor. Maglor leaned over Ali to give him a little kiss.

"I can't and won't guarantee the future," Maglor said. "But right now... we're remembering what we are to each other, remembering the good times. Making new memories." He kissed the top of Ali's head. "Helping each other forget the pain, at least for a little while."

They rocked together, and Ali calmed down, soothed by the presence of her partners, the love between them... the power in that love. She knew Sauron, Odin and their ilk were afraid of that power, they feared that fire. She was almost afraid of it herself, how fiercely they loved each other. But for now she drank in that energy, warm and bright, to try to rekindle hope and keep it alive.

Chapter 39

It was Medika's fiftieth birthday, and Böðvar wanted to take the family out to dinner at the diner in Ceduna where he and Medika had first met in 1991, when Medika was twenty and Böðvar was twenty-one. "She was working as a waitress," Böðvar explained, "the prettiest girl I'd ever seen. I always left her big tips but I was shy about chatting her up till one day I went outside to have a smoke - this was before I quit smoking - and saw her reading *Return of the King*. I decided that was an icebreaker, we could talk about that book, and other books." Böðvar chuckled. "Funny in hindsight, everything started over a Tolkien book."

Medika smiled and kissed his cheek. "It did feel fated." She put an arm around him. "Still does."

It was the consensus that they didn't know if Medika had been anyone from before, and Medika didn't have any dreams indicating memories of back then, but that was OK - this life wasn't just about restoring old connections, but making new ones.

Böðvar felt better if at least one person stayed behind to look after the sheep, and Darren decided that he would. But everybody else was going out - including Anthony. He felt a little strange about being invited out to the birthday celebration, feeling like he was intruding, but he felt like it would be rude to ask to stay behind, and he knew that it was just his English manners and nothing anyone had said or done - Böðvar and Medika had been very warm, treating everyone like family whether they were blood or not. In a way, Medika reminded him of his mother Elaine, which made him miss his mother. He wondered if Medika and Elaine would ever get the chance to meet each other; he got the feeling they'd like each other immensely. *Maybe I should ask Mum to come down for Christmas, or next year's Christmas,* Anthony thought to himself.

The diner was not really remarkable - the food was neither the greatest nor the worst Anthony had ever had - but it was sentimental to Böðvar and Medika as the place where they'd first met, and the diner was hospitable enough to give everyone free drinks and give Medika a free dessert for the occasion.

Earlier that morning Ali and Darren had made their mother a cake, and Medika still had room when they got back to the ranch. Cake was served as the family gathered around the television to watch a cooking show that Medika enjoyed. Before the program started, there was a black screen with text:

WARNING: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander viewers are warned that the following program may contain images and voices of deceased persons.

Sören raised an eyebrow. He gave a small clear of his throat, and all eyes were on him.

"I've, ah, been meaning to ask this for awhile and worry that I'm being insensitive," Sören said, "but why do I keep seeing that warning message on telly?"

Ali and Darren glanced at each other, then Ali and Medika. Ali and Darren both gestured to their mother and Medika nodded and said, "We have a practice that when someone dies, we're not to say their name - if they have to come up in conversation at all we refer to them indirectly, or by a different name - and we can't look at images or video of them for at least a year, sometimes several years. A number of our people believes this disturbs their spirit."

"Oh." And then Sören's mouth opened and his eyes widened. "Ah, shit. I've mentioned my mamma's name. Should I stop doing that?"

Medika shook her head. "It's been a long time since she died, yeh?"

Sören nodded. "She died in 1990."

"Quite some time, then. Don't get me wrong - there are some who will avoid names for that long, but at least here with us, it should be fine."

"OK, good. I don't want to offend anyone."

"You're fine," Medika said, patting him. "And I'm glad you asked." She touched his face. "I'm sorry about your mum. And I wish I'd gotten to see you grow up, I feel bad that we weren't there for you. I know we couldn't be, with your father's sister and her husband being the way they were, but..."

Sören gave her a hug, and Medika hugged him tight. Anthony felt a lump in his throat, aching for the abuse Sören endured in his younger years, also wishing he'd had more people who'd cared about him... wishing they'd been friends growing up.

Maybe in one of those parallel universes, Sören and I were friends. And then more than that, when we were old enough. It was a comforting thought.

After dessert and watching a couple of shows, Sören collected dishes, wanting to be helpful; Anthony accompanied him to assist him with washing and drying dishes. Admittedly, his intention wasn't completely to be kind to people who'd shown him hospitality - he got a good look at Sören's ass in those jeans, and after a few glances, Sören knew Anthony was ogling him and splashed water at Anthony. Anthony whacked Sören's bum with a dishtowel.

"I love you, you know," Anthony said, feeling fluttery at the grin on Sören's face.

"I love you too."

Then Anthony noticed Medika was entering the kitchen to go to the fridge, and she gave them an amused look. "Er," Anthony said, sheepish at however much she'd seen.

"It's all right," Medika said. "You make a cute couple."

"I know this sounds stupid," Sören said, "but thank you for being so... accepting. After the way Einar was, and Ka -" He couldn't finish the sentence, getting choked up.

Medika took him into her arms and gave him another tight hug. "Love is love. It knows no color, it knows no gender. A heart is big enough to love many, if that's what the heart wants. I don't judge. All that matters to me is whether my family is happy, and he makes you happy, doesn't he?"

Sören nodded.

Then Medika let go of Sören, turned to Anthony and gave him a hug too. Anthony returned the hug - once again it was a reminder of his mother, with the same sort of warmth and coziness of his mother's hugs - and Medika patted him. "Thank you," she said to him.

"For?"

"Making him happy. Taking care of him. He needs it." She got her drink and went back to the living room.

Anthony felt strangely emotional after that encounter. Once again, he felt like he'd come home, that he'd found family, a place to belong. There had been camaraderie with his fellow soldiers in the Royal Navy, and especially the tight-knit Special Boat Service - people who would fight and die for each other, a welcome change after having been bullied by his peers in school - but this was different. Anthony had been an only child, in a nuclear family, and though he had a good relationship with his parents there was nonetheless a feeling of *smallness* there, like he was missing something. He knew now what he'd been missing. It felt more natural to be in a big, extended family like this, with many bonds of kinship.

It felt familiar... something he'd lost from the days before. Something restored.

Anthony went back with Sören, Maglor and Dooku to the guest house, so he could spend some time with Craig and take a shower. He felt bad about not bringing Craig to the tent with him, but he knew Craig liked to roam around and would feel cooped up in there. He felt worse when Craig kept pulling on his hand for more pettings, standing up on his hind legs and headbutting him over and over again, not wanting to let him go take a shower.

The relaxation of the hot water and steam undid him, the feelings coming out in tears. He wasn't used to crying like this, wasn't used to *feeling* this much. He stayed in the shower for a bit longer than usual. He came out in a towel - it had been worked out that Anthony could change in the living room before he went back to his tent, rather than having to change in the small and steamed-up bathroom - but this time he didn't have privacy; Sören was waiting on the couch next to Anthony's folded-up T-shirt and pajama bottoms.

Sören wolf-whistled at the sight of Anthony with just a towel around his waist. Anthony bit his lower lip, cheeks burning, even though Sören had seen him naked plenty of times now - Sören still made him feel giddy and stupid.

"Hey, sexy," Sören said, grinning.

"Hi." Anthony casually shucked the towel from his waist - his cock started to rise at the sight of Sören looking at it like it was second dessert - and reached for the pajama bottoms.

"I, ah." Sören rubbed his beard. "I would offer to have you join us tonight but the bed is too small for four people. It's a bit small for three people, honestly."

"That's OK." Anthony's face burned even harder at the thought of having a foursome with Dooku and Maglor - and realizing Sören, being considerate of his partners, wouldn't be offering unless Dooku and Maglor were OK with it. His heart beat a little faster. "Besides, we don't want to get too loud." He had a feeling Sören would be even more of a screamer. His cock was standing at full attention now, and Sören smirked at it.

"But... can I join you in the tent tonight?"

"Please," Anthony said, nodding. He pulled on his shirt, feeling a bit ridiculous about that since he would probably be naked again in no time.

"Good," Sören said. He took Anthony's hand and began to lead him outside.

When they got in the tent Anthony did a once-over to make sure they didn't bring any unwanted guests, like scorpions or spiders. He and Sören sat on his air mattress, and just before Anthony could turn on the LED lanterns, Sören pointed up to the roof of his tent, which had a view of the night sky. "Can we cuddle for awhile and look at the stars?" Sören asked.

"Yes, we can." Anthony gave him a little kiss.

They lay back on the mattress together and that was what they did, Anthony holding Sören close, cradled against his chest, looking up at the view of the starry sky. The last time Anthony had regularly seen a sky without light pollution was during his time in the Middle East, which was more of a bitter memory for him than anything. Here and now, the moment felt almost sacred, gazing into the sea of stars, seemingly infinite, realizing how small Earth was. The pride that life had evolved from primordial ooze to harness fire and eventually go to the stars. The shame of the atrocities humanity had created, knowing full well that something like the Holocaust could happen again. The anger that the gods humanity worshiped had allowed so much evil, had sown division and hatred, escalating injustice and war. The hope that someday humanity might be free, and once liberated from the yoke of the gods, could unite as a planet, then go forth into those stars and find brotherhood with other species.

The fear that it would never happen... that the planet would be destroyed. The massive death energy, the rip in the Force... that could feed an evil god like Morgoth for ages, powering him up to destroy more worlds, more universes...

Anthony took a deep breath and made himself refocus on the majesty of the stars. Then he found Finarfin's memories surfacing - the years of the Trees, seeing starlight in the silver glow of Telperion, the golden glow of Laurelin. How lovely it was. How much Fëanor had loved it. He remembered Finarfin seeing his first sunrise after the Trees had been destroyed - the beauty of the gold, pink, peach, lavender and blue dawn, the *colors* of the sky... but also bittersweet, knowing nothing would ever be the same again. He would never see the starlight all day and all night, ever again. He remembered his vision of the Dagorath happening in another universe almost a year ago, the white flash that turned out to be another Fëanor using the Silmarils as a weapon, becoming a living supernova, the star of stars. He shivered, knowing that whether Sören wanted to believe it or not, he was capable of the same sort of destruction...

...but also, the force of creation. The Flame Imperishable was love, and Anthony felt as awed and humbled to be in the klieg light of Sören's love, as he was to look at the naked night sky in all of its glory. It seemed fitting that they were cuddling out here under the stars, marveling together at the beauty of it.

Anthony began to stroke Sören's curls, and at last Sören slid up to give him a kiss. A sweet, gentle kiss turned passionate as their lips parted and their tongues met. It wasn't long before Anthony was hard again, and so was Sören; Anthony smiled as he felt the hard bulge in Sören's pajama pants.

"Are you pondering what I'm pondering?" Anthony asked him.

"I think so, but we'll never get a monkey to use dental floss."

It took Anthony a moment to realize Sören had quoted *Pinky and the Brain* and he facepalmed, shaking with silent laughter until his sides hurt and his laughter erupted in

ridiculous noises. Sören gigglesnorted, which made Anthony laugh even harder. Harder still when the silliness of the moment did nothing to kill his erection - if anything, Anthony found Sören sexy when he was being ridiculous.

"Why are you like this?" Anthony kissed the tip of Sören's nose.

"Like you're not like this too." Sören booped Anthony's nose. "But you're also like this." Sören's hand strayed to palm where Anthony's pajama bottoms had tented, rubbing in slow, lazy circles. Anthony's breath hitched, cock stiffening even more at Sören's touch, the naughty look on Sören's face. Sören grinned and said, "If I didn't know better I'd say you have a fetish for monkeys using dental floss..."

Anthony smacked Sören's ass, and Sören gasped, then wiggled his ass playfully - also grinding against his thigh. "Please sir, may I have some more," Sören said.

Anthony nibbled on Sören's neck with a growl, and slapped Sören's ass again. Sören kissed him hard, and Anthony kissed Sören back for all he was worth, feverish now. As right as it had felt to cuddle and watch the stars together, it felt even more right to mate under those stars. Anthony turned on the LED lantern next to him and fished around in the box of supplies he kept in the tent - which included a tube of lubricant. Sören smiled when he saw it, and began undressing. Anthony got his clothes off too. As soon as they were both naked, Sören pushed him back down onto the air mattress, laying atop him, cock rubbing cock as they kissed deeply, hungry for each other.

"I want you," Sören husked, and began kissing and licking Anthony's neck and throat. Anthony moaned and shivered, cock stiffening even more at the feel of Sören's lips and tongue, and moaned again when Sören reached down to take both their cocks in his hand, stroking gently. "I need you." Sören kissed the sensitive place where the neck and shoulder met, then Anthony's sternum. "I love you." Sören rubbed his nose in Anthony's chest hair and started licking it; when Sören's tongue made its way to a nipple Anthony gasped, moaning louder as Sören suckled. He licked his way over to the other and lapped and sucked at it, then went back and forth between them, making Anthony crazy, clutching at Sören's head, panting, writhing.

Anthony let out a little noise of protest as Sören let go of their cocks, followed by a groan as Sören slid down to kiss and lick his stomach. "God, you're so fucking hot," Sören whispered, tracing the definition in Anthony's abs with his tongue. "So gorgeous." Sören's tongue slid down the treasure trail and Anthony felt like he was going to explode. Sören rubbed his nose in Anthony's bush, then began kissing and licking down to a thigh, kissing and nibbling at one thigh, then the other. Anthony's breath came out in gasps, quivering. Then Sören's lips wrapped around his cock and their eyes met, and the sight of his cock welcomed by those full lips, the lust in Sören's eyes, almost made him come right then.

Sören sucked slowly at first, a hand straying to play over Anthony's chest and stomach and thigh, and after a few minutes the hand cupped and gently rubbed Anthony's balls as Sören sucked harder, faster. Anthony groaned, losing himself in the filthy sweetness of Sören's mouth, wickedly talented. When Sören took Anthony's cock out of his mouth to lick the head in circles, slowly lick the shaft up and down, Anthony thought it was one of the sexiest things he'd seen in his life, hotter still when Sören kissed up and down the shaft, a naughty look in his eyes. Anthony was shaking like a leaf now, cock throbbing, balls tight and aching, feeling like he was going to die of the pleasure and tension when Sören drew part of the cock back into his mouth and sucked slowly, hand rubbing the shaft, and Sören's tongue rubbed as he sucked.

"Sören..." He wanted to come - he *would* come if Sören kept this up - but he wanted to be joined with the man he loved. He looked up at the starry sky, and met Sören's eyes again. They'd had a few sessions since he'd returned from England, they'd sucked and frotted and he'd had Sören in a number of positions, but Sören hadn't topped him yet. It had been years since he'd bottomed for someone, and now he felt a certain urgency for Sören to take him, to give himself as an act of love. He used the Force to lift up the tube of lubricant. "Fuck me." That came out less elegant than he'd intended, considering the emotions behind his decision, but he felt utterly consumed by need.

Sören let the cock slip from his mouth. He grabbed the lubricant and slid up, kissing Anthony, hard cock rubbing against Anthony's thigh. "How do you want it?"

"On my back. I want to look into those pretty eyes." Anthony touched Sören's face.

Sören smiled. He grabbed a pillow and slipped it under Anthony's hips. They kissed again, and then Sören kissed his way back down Anthony's body; as Sören's head went lower Anthony realized what Sören was going to do, and opened his legs wider. He moaned as Sören's tongue began to circle around the rim of his opening, and cried out once that wonderful tongue was inside him, slow and teasing. Sören's tongue was too good, making Anthony writhe, reaching up to grab the pillows, white-knuckled, panting, almost sobbing at the bliss of the way Sören's tongue lapped and brushed. "Oh god. Oh fuck, oh god, oh *fuck*, Sören..."

"Mmmmmmm." Sören's tongue took a few teasing swirls around the opening again. "Someone likes this."

"I love it. That tongue should be registered as a lethal weapon."

"Considering how many people have said something like that, maybe a weapon of mass destruction." Then Sören grinned. "Ass destruction."

Anthony facepalmed, heaving with laughter again. "Sören..."

Now Sören was licking at his cock, chasing the precum dripping down the shaft. Sören lubed up his fingers, and as he licked at Anthony's cock, a finger pushed into him, working in and out slowly. Sören's finger found that spot right away, rubbing it, and one finger became two, rubbing and rubbing. Anthony was tight but he relaxed around Sören's fingers, eager to feel Sören's cock rubbing there.

When Anthony moaned "Sören, please," Sören stopped fingering him and Anthony watched as Sören poured lube over his cock, then Sören hooked one of Anthony's legs around him and guided his cock to the passage. Anthony braced himself, and began to push out as Sören pushed in. That first moment of being stretched made Anthony feel like he was being split in half, it had been so long, but he kept pushing, and at last Sören was all the way inside him and that felt completely and utterly right. Anthony looked up at the stars and gave a little laugh of relief, a deep sigh of contentment that here and now, they were one flesh.

Sören moved slowly - Anthony could feel across their bond it wasn't just to avoid hurting him as he got adjusted to the fullness, but also to hold back his own release. "Fuck, you're tight," Sören growled, with a little shiver.

"It's been awhile."

"I guess so." Sören reached out to touch Anthony's face. "You feel incredible."

Anthony gasped as the bead in the ring of Sören's piercing brushed that sweet spot. "So do you..." He clenched his fists as the ring rubbed him again, moaned as the ring rubbed him again. "Oh *god*..."

Soon Anthony was rolling his hips, matching Sören's rhythm, then urging him on harder, faster. Sören gave in, rocking into him, the rubbing-rubbing-rubbing of Sören's piercing on that place making him crazy. Anthony reached down to stroke himself, the rhythm on his cock and inside him sending him right to that edge and keeping him there, going deeper and deeper into pleasure. With both of his legs on Sören's shoulders, Sören drove into him, making feral noises, and Anthony heard himself crying out, bucking underneath him, desperate to come but not wanting to stop, wanting to stay here where the only thing that existed was their pleasure, their passion, their raw, primal need, underneath the primordial stars.

Anthony felt himself start to lose it. Sören sensed it and put a hand over Anthony's hand, guiding the motions on his cock. "That's it," Sören rasped, eyes fierce. "Come, *elskan*. Come, *bróðir minn*..."

Anthony let go with a gasp, shooting over his chest and stomach, and Sören's torso. Three thrusts later Sören gave a deep growl, shuddering, and collapsed onto him, panting as he twitched; Anthony groaned at the feeling of Sören's flow into him as he contracted, exquisitely sensitive.

Anthony wrapped his arms around Sören and pet the sweat-damp curls, drifting off a little into the hazy bliss of release. A few minutes later Sören picked his head up and they kissed.

"That was fun," Sören said.

"That was amazing," Anthony said. He kissed Sören again. "*You* are amazing."

Sören gave a shy little smile, biting his lower lip. Anthony sighed - he found Sören incredibly sexy when he did that. Sören kissed him back and rested his head on Anthony's shoulder. He kissed there too, and what was meant to be a tender little kiss got Anthony going again, moreso when Sören began rubbing his nose in Anthony's chest hair. Sören laughed as he felt Anthony's cock rising. "Oh my, what's this?" Sören asked, gripping Anthony's cock.

Anthony grinned, not able to resist. "I think it's a monkey who wants to learn to use dental floss."

Sören rolled, howling, shaking, face flushed, tears streaming down his face. "Goddammit, Anthony," he wheezed. "Wow..."

"Did I finally out-troll you?"

"Yeah, you did." Sören kissed the tip of his nose, then kissed him again, full of passion and fire. Anthony's cock throbbed, and he moaned into the kiss as he felt Sören's cock hardening. "Mmmm," Sören said when the kiss broke, finger tracing circles around Anthony's nipple. "Maybe you can out-fuck me, too."

Anthony kissed him back, and started kissing down Sören's neck. "We can try." He reached for the lube.

After Anthony readied his cock, Sören straddled his hips and sank down. They both sighed at the feel of being joined once more. Anthony took Sören's hands and then pulled him down into a kiss. "I love you," Anthony whispered.

"I love you."

Anthony slapped Sören's ass. "Show me."

Sören rode him hard, panting. Anthony gripped Sören's hips and rocked his own, slamming into him, making Sören work for it. When Sören started to move his hips and ass in a circular motion it almost undid him, and Anthony grabbed Sören and kissed him again, started kissing Sören's neck and throat, kissed his nipples, teasing his nipples back and forth as he gripped Sören's cock and stroked it. The way Sören gasped and panted and moaned was delicious to him, the higher-pitched sounds as Sören got closer even moreso. Anthony tugged on a nipple ring with his teeth, lapped the hard nub faster, suckled harder, gave the other the same treatment, and then kissed Sören's heart, slid his lips back up Sören's neck. "You are so beautiful," he said, eyes drinking in the sight of Sören riding him in all his passionate glory under the fire of the stars. "I love the way you burn." His thumb started rubbing the frenulum and Sören trembled, letting out a long moan.

"I'm close," Sören breathed.

That next moment felt like an eternity, the two of them sweating as Sören bounced feverishly, Anthony pounding him, gripping Sören's cock as tightly as he could, stroking so hard and fast his hand was a blur. Sören threw back his head and let out a broken cry as his seed shot over Anthony's chest and throat, and a few seconds later Anthony cried out too, coming hard, feeling like he was burning up in the supernova of Sören's ecstasy, everything a lovely light.

They lay there shattered, catching their breath, still trembling as the pleasure throbbed and pulsed; Anthony felt like he'd been reduced to a mound of jelly, and he couldn't stop grinning like an idiot.

After awhile they rolled onto their sides, legs braided, holding each other, rubbing noses. Sören stroked his cheek, smiling sweetly. But Anthony sensed a sadness to him, and poked the tip of Sören's nose. "What is it?"

Sören exhaled sharply. "If you want... I can swallow my pride and see if there's a way to get in touch with Freyr, if he'd be willing to give you his blood too -"

Anthony shook his head. "You told me he'd been a real asshole, said some downright racist things to Ali and Kenny. I'm not sure I want you to lower yourself like that." Anthony kissed Sören's hand.

"It's going to hurt when..." Sören couldn't finish the sentence, but Anthony knew what the rest of it was: *when you die and I'm still alive.*

The thought of Sören watching him decline in old age, how seeing him feeble and weak would traumatize him, didn't sit well with Anthony, but neither did Sören going to Freyr about it - Anthony felt very strongly that when people show you who they are, you should believe them, and something about that last exchange Sören had with Freyr didn't sit right with him at all, like it would be opening up a can of worms beyond a blow to Sören's pride.

"I hope I'll find you again," Anthony said, his eyes tearing up. "And again. Across different

lifetimes." Anthony smirked. "It'll be like roleplaying, except not."

Sören snickered and gave him a swat. "So what, next lifetime you'll be a French maid? Kinky."

Anthony put on a deliberately bad French accent. "Oui monsieur, I will be 'ere to clean your oo-la-la with my feather duster."

"No dental floss?"

When they calmed down, Anthony's arms tightened around him, aching for what Sören was going to go through in the years to come. Knowing it might not even be seeing him old and frail, but people in Anthony's line of work didn't tend to live long. At forty-one, Anthony had already outlived some of his colleagues. He looked up at the infinite stars, and then at Sören's puppydog eyes. "I don't know what the future holds... I just know I want to make our present really, really count. Seize each day, each opportunity that presents itself for us to live and love each other... and live and love to the fullest."

"We were pretty full a little while ago," Sören quipped.

"Mhm." Anthony kissed the tip of his nose.

Chapter 40

It was Saturday, October ninth - the one-year anniversary of the Dagor Dagorath happening in another universe. It was also a day that some members of the family, like Ali and Böðvar, had suggested reclaiming with a celebration of the family's reunion - not just of the present, but the past. A picnic had been planned at the seaside.

Böðvar didn't like leaving the sheep alone for too long, and Medika offered to stay behind. She also volunteered to watch the children. Even though it was freely offered, Sören felt self-conscious about asking Medika to watch his son and daughters, but Ali had no problem letting Megadeth and Metallica spend some time with their grandmother, and the twins had no problem with that either, especially when Medika suggested they could bake cookies together.

Darren was taking his javelin to do some javelin throws for entertainment; Maglor had brought his war harp on the RV, and now he was talking of bringing it along on the picnic, to play and also provide some entertainment. Dooku had spent most of last night preparing food for the picnic, and now he was double-checking to make sure they had enough in the way of beverages, recyclable dishware and utensils, and the like. After packing baby food, formula and diapers, Sören decided to get the drawstring pouch with the Silmarils - even though he knew the ranch was warded, and it *felt* safe, Sören was still paranoid about going anywhere without the Silmarils. Anthony erred even more on the side of paranoia - Sören noticed his holster and the satellite phone. On the one hand Sören found it comforting that Anthony was always prepared for trouble, on the other hand it was a reminder that no matter how safe they felt, they never quite were - a reminder of how Dag had been taken on their birthday last year, and the trail was very cold now.

Sören tried to push those thoughts out of his mind as he wheeled the stroller up the RV ramp, baby Søren gurgling in his sling. It was a warm spring day, the sky was a lovely bright turquoise, and they were going to spend time together as a family. Sören smiled as he watched his uncle ride on his Harley ahead of the RV, still wild and free-spirited into his fifties. Life was good, and he was determined to just be in the moment today and enjoy that.

The picnic site was on grassy cliffs overlooking the ocean. Wildflowers were blooming, and Sören was delighted to see a kookaburra on a rock, singing. The smell of the salt air, sound of the waves, and sight of the sapphire blue sea as far as the eye could see made Sören feel refreshed and relaxed. The family spread out blankets on the grass and Dooku began to put out the food, an assortment of fresh fruit and vegetables with dip, crackers and cheese, spinach hummus wraps, chicken caesar pitas, smoked salmon deviled eggs, an antipasto salad, and raspberry tarts.

Darren tossed the javelin while the family watched; Sören was impressed by how far the javelin flew, and the grace of Darren as he threw it, like he was performing a dance. After a dozen throws Darren sat down to eat. Then Maglor sat on a stool and played the harp as they ate, some harp covers of familiar songs like "Despacito", "Wonderwall", "Enter Sandman", and "Thunderstruck", as well as original compositions he'd written over the years - Sören felt a wistful pang of nostalgia at "By the Sea", "Saudade", and "Walk In Fire". The Silmarils got warmer in Sören's pocket, seeming to react to Maglor's song, and since they were in a fairly isolated location, with no one around and probably no one to come around, Sören relaxed a little of his caution and took out the drawstring pouch, letting the Silmarils float in the air and sparkle as Maglor met his eyes and began to play "Lovesong" by The Cure, singing directly to Sören.

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 blinked back tears. *I love you too.*

After the song Sören put the Silmarils back in their pouch and then Ali dragged Maglor off his stool and onto a picnic blanket. "You haven't eaten yet," she said, and shoved a cracker with Swiss cheese in his mouth before he could protest.

"And you," Frankie said, tugging on Sören's sleeve. "No being a wet blanket today." She sank a carrot into dip and put it in his mouth. She looked out at the sea and gave a happy little sigh, then looked at Sören, and baby Søren, who had been taken out of his sling and was cuddled against both of them. She touched the baby's face, who cooed and smiled. Frankie smiled back. "I still can't believe we made that. He's so beautiful."

"He has a beautiful mum." Sören kissed the tip of her nose; he still acknowledged her as the baby's mother even though she had given him full custody.

"You're beautiful too." Frankie wrinkled her nose. "Even with your dip breath."

"Here, I can make it worse." Sören dipped a cherry tomato, put it in his mouth, and kissed her. She laughed into the kiss as she kissed him back.

When they pulled apart Sören smelled smoke, which didn't seem right - they weren't using a grill, and though the Silmarils had gotten noticeably warmer as Maglor played, they weren't burning his pocket. The smell of smoke got more intense and then suddenly a giant shadow rolled over them, like a storm was coming or there was an eclipse... but it was no storm, no eclipse.

They were surrounded by two dozen Balrogs. All with great wings of fire and smoke, some with long manes of blood red, some with floods of ink black hair. All pale as alabaster - pale as death - and with skin that seemed to glitter in the sunlight, wearing leather trousers and iron chains. Evil yellow-orange eyes. Each wielding two flaming whips.

Before anyone could react, a Balrog waved his hand and Frankie was flung several meters away. "FRANKIE!" Sören yelled, scrambling up, and before he could get to her - before he could do anything with the Force - he watched as six flaming whips lashed her and coiled around her, and Frankie screamed as she was engulfed in flame, the most horrible shrieking Sören had ever heard in his life. She charred almost immediately, and now the grass was ablaze where she had been thrown. The burnt corpse was terrible, and Sören could barely believe what he was seeing... the horror...

Margrét made a keening noise and froze. She began to rock back and forth, howling.

"Get her out of here," Maglor called to Böðvar, the closest person to her, who nodded and helped Margrét up. She didn't want to leave - now she was screaming, almost as terrible as Frankie's screams had been - and Böðvar picked her up and started carrying her.

Sören's heart hammered in his ears. This was his nightmare, come to life. It was here. And in his rush to get up to try to save Frankie, the babies were now unattended on the blanket, which made him feel soul-crushing guilt. As Sören tried to scoot backwards, a flaming whip came at him. He ducked and rolled out of the way just in time.

Dooku was the first to react, as enraged as Sören had ever seen him, an intensity in his dark eyes that sent a chill through him. Sören could feel something *crack* in Dooku's cold iron composure, screaming out *you hurt my sister, you attacked my Fëanáro, you touched what is MINE*. Dooku rose and reached out his hand, a breeze stirring around him. A bolt of blue lightning sparked and shot out from his fingers, and Sören watched as a net of lightning fell upon one Balrog and threw the Balrog back some meters like Frankie had been thrown, crisping then disintegrating. Dooku took a deep breath and threw another bolt of lightning, and Sören could feel across their bond he was trying to aim for several Balrogs at once but all but one flew out of the way, the lightning weaving around the one who didn't make it in time, a bright flash as the Balrog broke into sizzling, sparking pieces that quickly faded.

Darren used the Force to pull his javelin to himself, and hurled it with all his might, letting out a fierce roar as the javelin aimed for a Balrog. The Balrog flew out of the way just in time; Darren swore and moved the javelin back to himself with the Force. He aimed and threw again, and when the Balrog moved out of the way Darren used the Force to push the javelin at the Balrog, impaling it through the heart. The Balrog exploded with a screech in sparks and smoke.

The javelin floated back towards Darren, and before he could throw it again, Balrogs lashed out at him. Darren jumped out of the way, and as Dooku threw another bolt of Force lightning with the Balrogs in range, they lashed out at him too. Darren body-slammed Dooku out of the way just as one Balrog took the Force lightning and disintegrated.

Sören's head was spinning, in a panic, not knowing what to do. *My babies. My babies...* He felt a sickening surge of guilt, that they were over there on the blanket, screaming, still unattended. He ran towards them again and another whip came at him. Now Dooku Force-threw him out of the way, and towards his children, but just before Sören could grab or shield them, another whip came at him. Sören rolled, and watched as Kate and Tori sailed in the air towards Kenny - who was having some sort of telepathic conversation with Ali, the two of them gesturing back and forth, and finally Ali said, "Take the kids, get out of here."

Just before Kenny could safely grab the floating children, four whips coiled around him and he went up in flames. Kenny screamed; Ali screamed even louder.

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Anthony threw himself forward to catch the toddlers before they could hit the ground. He put the squalling children behind him, shielding Kate and Tori and baby Søren with his body, and took out the satellite phone, watching the grass burn, coughing on the smoke. He hit the number 3 and after one ring, he said, "This is Frosty," using his codename. "I've got a situation, the Sydney snowflakes encountered para hostiles. There's now a little less than two dozen. Everything's on fire, I need a containment squad, Code Omega." That meant biological and environmental cleanup - including firefighting drones - as well as attack drones. And video to show the home office. "Do you have a lock on my GPS?"

"We can get you in about fifteen minutes out."

"Fucking bloody *hell*, I don't have fifteen minutes. We're all going to fucking die." Anthony hung up, not waiting for a response.

Anthony felt like he was going to throw up with all the carnage - and he was no stranger to dead bodies - but this was worse than anything he'd seen in the Gulf War. Even worse because it was *personal*. This was his family. It was like a piece of his heart, his soul, had been ripped out. And that was without getting into the memories of standing against this evil when he was Finarfin. Besides leaving Finarfin out of Ecthelion's fatal battle with Gothmog, Tolkien had mixed up the dates - the War of Wrath happened before Ecthelion's last stand - and Finarfin had been traumatized by both. Here and now that trauma came rushing back to his mind in little flashbacks, threatening to freeze him up. He made himself focus, taking deep breaths, drew on the adrenaline rush, quickly looking around, observing, planning his move.

Böðvar was trying to make it to where the RV and Harley were parked, carrying Margrét, who had stopped shrieking and was now sobbing hysterically instead. The Balrogs swarmed him, and as they lashed out at him he tossed Margrét to the side out of their way and then he was coiled by the whips and gone, up in flames.

Anthony pulled the gun out of his holster. Still shielding the children with his own body, he started pumping off rounds. Some of them missed entirely, with the Balrogs dodging, flying out of the bullet's path, and one of them took hits to the shoulder, another to the leg, but it didn't stop them, barely slowed them. "Come on." Anthony reloaded, gritting his teeth. "Come on, you fucking bastards, DIE."

Margrét snapped out of her meltdown, a look of wrath on her face, and reached out with her hands, Force throwing two Balrogs to collide with each other, then they flew up in the air as she Force-choked them. Before she could finish the job, another Balrog lashed the whip at her, and in moving out of the way, her hold over the Balrogs broke. Now four whips were coming at her, and Dooku fired off another bolt of Force lightning just before he Force threw her out of the way. The Force lightning was dodged. Dooku didn't look so good, like the intense Force use was taking a lot out of him, and then Dooku started to dry heave. Just before a Balrog could lash Dooku, Sören jumped out, shielded Dooku with his body and shoved Dooku and rolled them both out of the way.

Darren picked up the javelin again and threw it, and narrowly dodged another whip. Before he could retrieve the javelin, Ali called out, "Get the kids, get them safe, GO."

Darren was several meters away from where Anthony had just reloaded his pistol. As Darren sprinted off to the side, giving Anthony a clear range to fire, the Balrogs began chasing him. Anthony turned and aimed, spraying another round of bullets. "COME ON, FUCKING DIE ALREADY!" he snarled, and watched a Balrog explode as he shot one in the head. *That's one.* Another Balrog exploded as it took two bullets to the heart.*Two.* "Die, you fuckers, *die.*" Anthony shot his last bullet and the Balrog dodged; he had to reload again.

—

Ali's friend, father and husband-to-be had all died. Now Ali and Maglor looked at each other; Ali could feel Maglor frozen by trauma, and Ali wanted to freeze, herself, but she knew if she didn't power through everyone was going to die. Everyone might die anyway,

but at least there was a chance if she kept fighting.

Ali had told Darren to get the kids because he could reach them faster and between him and Maglor he was the bulkier one. Ali now questioned her judgment - Maglor was harder to kill and had super-human strength and agility, and Darren was the champion javelin thrower - but it was too late to go back on the course of action. Ali used the Force to thrust Darren's javelin at Maglor, and that broke him out of his freeze. With a look of determination on his face that Ali would have found sexy if there were not so much carnage and the imminent threat of death, Maglor charged towards a Balrog, spinning and jumping out of the way of the whips. Ali watched as Maglor speared a Balrog through the heart, the Balrog going up in sparks and smoke. Maglor swung the spear at another nearby Balrog, dodging the whips.

Ali had to think fast. It was getting harder and harder to think. And the fire was raging in the grass, the smoke was thickening. Ali coughed.

Margrét and Sören were both in action now, and each Force-choked a Balrog to death. Dooku attempted to throw another lightning bolt, which was dodged; Dooku started to dry heave again, and was also coughing at the smoke from the burning grass. Ali coughed too, watching through the haze as Margrét and Sören both tried to Force-choke more Balrogs, just for the hold to break as whips came at them and they dodged.

Ali watched Dooku try to spark more lightning and fail, doubled over in a coughing fit. Maglor was rushing at the Balrogs with Darren's javelin, continuing to jump and spin out of the way, lunging and getting dodged, aiming for the Balrog's heart and getting the shoulder instead. Ali quickly counted: Dooku had killed three Balrogs, Anthony had killed two Balrogs, Darren had killed one, Margrét and Sören had each killed one, Maglor had killed one... for now. That was nine down; there were fifteen more, they were still outnumbered.

Ali was shaking with anger, not able to believe Frankie, Kenny and her father were gone... the Maedhros part of her not able to believe that Fingon had been killed by Balrogs *again*.

A part of her wanted to put her hands up and surrender, let them kill her too, but she had to fight for what was left of her family. She had to fight for her children, back at the ranch with her mother - hoping that the wards held up and if there were more Balrogs, they weren't able to get to them there. She had to *fight*, for everything she ever had been, was now, and would be. She wasn't going out like this.

But she could make them think she was. She looked at the ocean through the smoke, and a thought came to her. It was mad, but it was their only shot.

"Hey!" Ali put her fingers in her mouth and whistled. "Fuckheads! Come and get me!"

She started to run, playing chicken. Not all of them followed - eight of the remaining fifteen Balrogs did, with the other seven staying back. But those seven had Maglor, Margrét and Sören, Anthony and possibly Dooku if he could recharge; Darren was just about to intercept the kids. It was a somewhat more even fight. Eight would have to be enough.

Ali's breath in a gulp, she ran as fast as she could towards the edge of the cliff, making it look like she was going to throw herself into the sea.

_

Anthony reloaded just as Darren reached him and used the Force to scoop up Kate, Tori, and baby Søren. The smoke was stronger, and Anthony tried not to cough.

A whip lashed out at Darren and when Anthony shoved him out of the way, Anthony ended up taking it, the whip burning across his stomach. Anthony let out a scream of pain, and fell over on his side, dropping his pistol. A Balrog pushed it away, laughing, and then Anthony felt the whip across his back. Just before whips could coil around him and set him on fire, Maglor threw himself into the path and lunged with the javelin, making the Balrogs retreat.

Through the stinging, searing pain in the back and front of him, feeling too hot, like he was going to combust any second, he watched Darren running away with the kids, at marathon speed, and then Ali running towards the edge of the sea-cliff, and thought to himself: *She's going to pull a Glorfindel.*

But instead of throwing herself off the cliff tangled up with a Balrog, and the others swarming her, at the very last second she jumped and rolled off to the side instead of off the cliff, and Anthony felt her *push* as hard as she could with the Force, knocking four of the eight Balrogs chasing her off the edge of the cliff into the sea like bowling pins. Maglor speared another Balrog through the heart. Dooku and Margrét and Sören Force threw the six Balrogs surrounding them into the remaining four Balrogs at the edge of the cliff, pushing all ten of them off into the sea.

Anthony watched as Ali rose to her feet, locks whipping around her like Medusa's serpents, eyes white instead of silver, blue sparks of lightning crackling from her. It was the most terrifying thing Anthony had ever seen in his life, even more than the djinn in the Middle East years ago; Anthony wet his pants uncontrollably, understanding the myths of people in terror of the gods, and this living goddess was *on their side*.

Ali raised her hands, locks continuing to billow, eyes white and glowing, and blue lightning shot from both her hands to attack the Balrogs in the sea, the water conducting electricity. Anthony was both satisfied and sickened by the screaming and the acrid smell of fourteen electrocuted Balrogs.

Now his eyes were heavier, his vision fading. He saw Dooku pass out, and Maglor went right to Dooku's side. Ali dropped, still conscious, shaking like she herself was receiving electric shocks, and when she stopped convulsing her eyes went back to their normal grey and met Anthony's. Anthony gave her a very weak thumbs up before he started coughing from the smoke. He saw himself coughing up blood.

Sören was there, kneeling beside him, sobbing. "Oh god. Oh god, Anthony..."

Anthony gave a weak smile. If he had to die now, at least his last sight would be the man he loved. "Hey."

"Don't die. Don't you fucking die on me..."

Anthony coughed up more blood. With his very last bit of strength, he reached for Sören's hand. "I love you."

"I love you. I..." Sören sobbed.

—

Anthony closed his eyes. He was still breathing, but just barely. Sören could see the blood through the back of Anthony's shirt... the shirt was also charred; Sören knew the burns on Anthony's back were going to be grisly.

The drones Anthony had called for were zooming in now, putting out the fires. Sören wondered if the drones would know to send paramedics, and didn't know how to explain *this* to paramedics. Or if Anthony would even survive in time.

He hadn't been able to save Frankie. He had lost Kenny and his uncle. Their charred remains lay in the grass, terrible to look at. He was crushed by that, though he knew the full weight of it would hit him later, when the adrenaline had worn off. Dooku appeared to still be alive - Sören was worried, with the way Dooku had spent himself with Force use and inhaled a lot of smoke. Maglor was glowing silver now, and Sören saw him put his hands on Dooku's chest, hands looking like they were made of light, and Maglor was breathing light; Sören could feel him trying to repair the smoke inhalation.

That gave Sören an idea. It was crazy - the craziest thing Sören had ever done in what had been a lifetime of Force-related craziness - but he had to try *something*. He took the Silmarils out of their pouch, held the three stones in both his hands, cupped like he was making an offering. A bubble of light surrounded him and Anthony.

The blood of a god flowed through his veins. Not just the blood Ingwion had given him to make him immortal... but knowing there had been at least one universe where Fëanor had thrown down the Valar, had destroyed another universe, which was a deity-level display of power if Sören had ever heard of one.

He couldn't turn back time and bring Frankie back from the dead, or Kenny, or Böðvar, but he could try to keep Anthony from joining them.

I am the Flame Imperishable, and ***you shall not perish****.*

Sören bit his lower lip as hard as he could, drawing blood. He leaned in and his lips brushed Anthony's. Anthony murmured, and then licked his lip. "You're bleeding," he mumbled. "You OK?" Then Anthony faded again.

Sören put the Silmarils away. He could hear a helicopter, and thought it was probably not a good idea to have them out when whoever was coming, got here. Sören's hands were still radiating warmth, throbbing with power, from having held the Silmarils, and he began to pet Anthony's hair, watching his breathing slow down. "Don't you die," Sören growled. "Don't you fucking die. Don't you die on me..."

Sören closed his eyes. When the helicopter landed and medics rushed out, he cried out as they went to Anthony, pushing him out of the way. He tried to fight his way back over and Maglor who held him, arms like a vise. "Shhh, let them do their job," Maglor soothed.

A young and haughty-looking man with short red hair, wearing a black suit and black sunglasses, came forward. Maglor let go of Sören as the suit put out his hand. "Benjamin McNamara, MI6. We'd like to have a word with you about what just happened... what our drones caught on camera."

Sören didn't shake the agent's hand. "I deal with him," Sören said, pointing to Anthony. "Not you."

"He's a bit indisposed right now. We need to know what those smoke creatures were. It's a matter of public safety, you understand. I promise, no harm will come to you."

Not thinking, just feeling - angry, needing to lash out at something - Sören punched him in the nose and watched McNamara almost drop; the sunglasses were busted now, revealing icy blue eyes. "I said *I deal with him*. Until and unless he dies, I'll talk to *him* about it. Not you."

McNamara held his face, and then he pulled out a taser. To his surprise, it didn't work on Sören because of the way immortality had changed his physiology. Sören folded his arms.

"You win," McNamara said, "for now... but if he doesn't wake up..."

Sören Force threw McNamara into the burnt and wet grass, not caring if it ruined the fancy suit, or his chances at diplomacy later. "PISS. OFF."

Chapter 41

He sees the waterfall, sparkling like diamonds. He sees her, clad in a gossamer white gown, a flood of pale blonde hair that looks silver or gold depending on the way the light touches it. She is standing at her Mirror, a beam of white light rising from the basin like a beacon... her presence pulling him like a magnet, but he still walks.

They are face-to-face, eyes meeting. She reaches out to touch his cheek, smiling at him with tenderness and sadness. *Father.*

Artanis. The name comes to him freely. He looks down at his hands, then down at himself, and sees himself robed in sky blue and white; he can feel the weight of his hair. *Am I dead?*

No. She presses her forehead to his.*But there has been death. My aunt, my cousins... I see not where their souls have gone.*

He takes her hands in his. *How did the Balrogs find us? Do you know?*

Sauron. And those aiding him.

A chill goes through him, though her energy is warm. *Is there... an infiltrator? Have you seen?* The thought horrifies him. He doesn't want to doubt anyone in the family, but espionage is his job; he has to ask.

Not among you currently. His daughter lets go of his hands. Before he can speculate on who or what that implies - a sneaking suspicion he has - she goes on, *Sauron is not the only problem you have, of course. The Valar are... corrupt. My uncle was right, and you can tell him I said so.* A wry smile. *Not about everything. He still made grave mistakes... and you can tell him I said that, as well. But he saw through the Valar to their rotten core... and I have been a fool.* She puts her hands on the edge of the basin.*I am gathering a resistance here in the Blessed Lands. There are not many of us, but a wise man once said small folk, and small acts, are enough to keep the darkness at bay.*

He raises an eyebrow. *Surely you're not asking all of us who remain in Middle-Earth to take the Straight Road, are you? That won't go over well.* He sighs. *I know you don't want to hear this, but I don't want to go back, either. Middle-Earth is my home now -*

*No, I am not asking that.*Her face remains neutral but he can sense disappointment and slight disapproval - and he can't entirely blame her for that, knowing that it must be lonely for her without her kin, even with past bad blood between her and some of them. She begins to circle around the basin, and then starts pacing before the waterfall. *I am, however, asking for* one *of you to take the Straight Road and be received by me in Aman.*

He has to ask. *Why?*

She turns to face him again, walks towards him slowly and deliberately. *They know you have been attacked and sustained casualties. Though it is by Sauron's doing, they nonetheless see it as an agent of fate -*

*Like Jehovah allowed Satan to smite Job.*He immediately feels like an idiot for saying that, wondering how much his daughter understands about Middle-Earth religions, and he doesn't even know why he's recalling that Bible story considering he's not religious and

was not raised in a religion.

She does not respond to that directly, but goes on, *Now would be an opportunity for at least one of you to pretend your pride has been broken, come back and pretend to repent... as* you *once did long ago, after the Exile and the Doom. The one who comes back can feed the Valar false information about what your group is up to... which will buy you some time to build strength and gather your resources, as you've enough problems without the Valar meddling further. And when the Valar gloat to one of the survivors, as they will... that will sow more distaste, help more of our people see how vile they truly are.*

He cocks his head to one side. *How do we know this isn't a trap? That whoever takes the Straight Road and returns, isn't going to be tortured, imprisoned, or even voided out of existence?*

She exhales. *I have petitioned for mercy, that whoever returns shall not be punished. For all that the Valar may be foul, there are limits, they will abide by the oath they swore to me.*

He senses she is being honest on her part - this is not a trap she herself is laying - but he still feels cautious; he knows oaths can be broken, he knows loopholes can be found. *I can't promise anything. I can deliver the message, I can't deliver results.* He sighs. *Best hope they don't shoot the messenger, either. Or one in particular.* He gets a feeling Sören isn't going to care for this strategy.

I think we both know my uncle would be the last to harm you.

Their eyes lock. *There was a time when you called us degenerates,*he reminds her. *When you accused him of leading me astray -*

*I hold those views no longer.*Now her composure is gone and the grief shows clearly on her face. *I was wrong, Father. Please consider what I am doing - what I am trying to do - an act of restitution.*

There's one more thing. He folds his arms. *I know we put stock in prophetic dreams and visions, but this still seems like a stretch. How can I convince them this was a real visitation and not just... whatever's going on with my body making me hallucinate?*

She steps away a few paces, and he watches her take out a silver comb and combs at her hair rather not gently. She comes back to him with three strands of hair, and wraps them around his hand. She takes his hand in hers, closes her eyes, and makes an incantation in Elvish, as she glows very, very brightly, blinding.

She opens her eyes again, and she says, *You must return to your world now.*

Wait. Can you tell me who you meant by 'not among you currently'? And do you know where Findaráto -

Everything is starting to go white; he feels himself pushed back as he had been pulled forward. She fades out of his sight, and through the white haze he hears one last word from her: *Namárië.*

—

Anthony woke with a start, feeling like something or someone had touched him. There was no one else in the room with him, though he heard voices outside - including the breathy lilt and rolling r's of Sören's accent.

He took a quick look around to orient himself. He was laying in what he presumed was a hospital bed, hooked up to machines monitoring his vital signs; he was in a pale aqua green scrub gown, underneath a white sheet. The hospital room was on the small side, and the walls were an industrial grey brick. Anthony had a feeling he knew what this place was: "the Shop", as people in his department called it, when there had been an incident where agents or snowflakes got injured but because of the paranormal nature of the incident they couldn't be taken to a regular hospital, so there were in-house doctors and specialists who could set up a sketchy-looking but safe pop-up emergency room on-call.

Anthony looked at his left hand, and when he saw the three strands of hair wrapped around his hand, which looked like thin glittering wire forged of silver and pale gold, his right hand clapped over his mouth and he choked back a strangled noise.

He gingerly pulled back the sheet - he felt like *hell*, he was exhausted and ached all over, he was amazed he was even alive - and he lifted his scrub gown a few inches off his body, peeking down it so he could get a clear view of his stomach. He remembered very vividly taking the Balrog's fiery whip - he knew in his life as Finarfin those same two whip burns, across his stomach and his back, had killed him before they could coil him and set him on fire - and by rights, he should have horrific burn and laceration scarring.

There was only the thin trace of a laceration scar - noticeable, but already fading, not anything remotely like the scarring he *should* have had from that kind of injury, and he knew the Shop didn't perform cosmetic surgery for scar removal. "*Jesus*."

A nurse heard him and peeked her head in, then stepped out and said, "Doctor Zabrovski, he's awake."

The name confirmed for Anthony this was the Shop: he'd dealt with Zabrovski before, though not in the last couple years. Anthony pulled up the sheet to hide Galadriel's hair, and watched as Zabrovski walked in.

"Captain Hewlett-Johnson," he said, using Anthony's rank in the Royal Navy as a courtesy. "How are you feeling today?"

"Like shit," Anthony said honestly. His mouth was dry. "Can I get some water?"

"I will put in a request."

Anthony took a deep breath. "How long have I been out?"

"Two days."

The progress of the scar healing would have been alarming even if it had been a few weeks, but knowing it had healed that much just in two days... Anthony shuddered. He didn't know what disturbed him more, holding three strands of Galadriel's hair, or what his speed healing implied.

"Can you wiggle your toes for me?"

Anthony did.

"And your fingers?"

Anthony was reluctant to move his hand above the sheet, not wanting the hairs to be remarked upon, but he showed just his fingers and wiggled them.

"Can you move your legs?"

Anthony made kicking motions.

"And you can sit up?"

Anthony sat up, with the sheet still covering him, then lay back down.

"It seems you are on the mend," Zabrovski said, "and there are some people who are going to want to talk to you, so I'll be discharging you soon. In the meantime..." Zabrovski walked towards the door and called out, "You may come in now."

Sören stormed in and gave Zabrovski a death glare. "I will leave you two alone," Zabrovski said, and closed the door behind him as he left.

"I'm sorry I wasn't here when you woke up. They wouldn't let me sit in here while you were unconscious..." Sören's nostrils flared.

"It's all right, Sören."

"No, it's not bloody all right -"

Anthony gave him a pointed look. Then he spoke into Sören's mind. *I need you to do something for me.*

What?

Check to see if there are any specimen bags in the room. I need one.

For... Sören raised his eyebrows. *You want a handjob, or something?*

Anthony facepalmed - of course Sören's mind would go there - and then he shook his head, trying not to laugh too hard, since laughing still hurt. *Just... get the bag.*

Sören walked over to the sink, which had bins for masks and gloves. He opened up a cupboard above the sink and found a bin of plastic containers and a bin of plastic bags. Using a tissue, he selected a bag. *Have to keep their supplies sterile, and all.*Sören brought the bag over, giving him a confused look.

Anthony pulled his left hand out of the sheet and Sören's jaw dropped when he saw the three strands, flashing gold in one direction and silver in the other. Anthony put the hairs in the bag, sealed it up, and handed the bag back to Sören. *I'll explain to you later, as in, when we're not here.*

Fair. Sören took a deep breath and put the bag with Galadriel's hair in his pocket. Then he used the Force to grab a chair, pulled it over, and sat down. "How are you?"

"Alive." Anthony narrowed his eyes. "Sören... I..." He thought it was better to show than tell. Even though Sören had seen his equipment several times now and he wasn't modest around his lover, for the sake of anyone else who might be passing by and see through

the window in the door, he covered his lower half with the sheet as he pulled up the scrub gown to reveal the faint scarring on his stomach. Sören's mouth opened, and he started shaking a little. He covered his mouth with his hand and the other hand just pointed, finger trembling, before he pulled himself back together.

Anthony let the scrub gown fall back down. *The Balrogs' whips would have killed me, that was how I died before.* He spoke aloud for the rest. "But it didn't kill me. The scarring should be more severe than that and it isn't. *What did you do?*"

"I, ah." Sören gave a nervous little laugh, ran his hand through his curls, rubbed his beard, and bit his lower lip. He looked down at the floor, then at Anthony. "I. Um. I kind of made you immortal."

"You *kind of* made me immortal."

"Jæja."

Anthony raised an eyebrow.

"Look..." Sören took a deep breath and shifted uncomfortably in his seat. "I didn't know I could. It was a completely wild, crazy, spur-of-the-moment idea I had, that maybe it wasn't just Ingwion who had that kind of power. And it kills me that I didn't realize it until just then. Maybe I could have prevented Fra -" He couldn't finish the sentence, tearing up.

"You didn't know, and even if you did, I don't know if any of them would have *chosen* that."

Sören swallowed hard - Anthony could feel him reacting to the emphasis on the word "chosen". "It was a last-ditch effort to save your life, and I guess it worked."

"You guess."

Sören sighed.

Anthony didn't want to fight with him - he didn't want to make Sören feel bad for doing what he felt he had to do, he especially didn't want to make Sören feel bad for saving his life, but the idea that he was now immortal, too, the ways this would complicate his life... Anthony pinched the bridge of his nose. "Look. We can continue this conversation after they discharge me, though... more likely, after the office has a talk with me about what happened."

"What are you going to tell them? Are you going to tell them about..."

"About what happened to me? Being immortal now? Yes, I have to tell them about that."

"Whoopsidoodle."

—

As it turned out, when Anthony was discharged, he was escorted immediately to another room in the warehouse used by the Shop. His superior, Peter Pemberton, had been flown all the way out from the UK and was sitting at the steel fold-out table, a burly bald man wearing business casual and a grumpy frown. The agents escorting them left them alone.

For the next hour, Anthony gave a report of the Balrog attack, being careful not to mention that Tolkien's works were real, saying only the "smoke creatures" came from "another dimension" and "were known as enemies of Marcus Lauer's people". His reservation with revealing that Tolkien's works weren't entirely fictional was that they would make a connection with the Silmarils and try to make Sören give them up, and he knew that would not end well for either side. He knew that the cameras on the drones had seen Sören "power up" with the Silmarils, but as far as MI6 knew that was just a unique facet of Sören's Force sensitivity and they hadn't made a connection with the three stones, or if they were, they weren't telling him.

Finally, Pemberton addressed the topic Anthony wanted even more to avoid, but knew he would have to discuss. "Your injuries. You are... quite improved."

"Yes," Anthony said.

Pemberton sat back in his chair. "The doctors tell me the wounds have mostly healed. The scars are mostly gone. That's unusual, even for people with psi powers."

"...Yes."

"But three of the snowflakes can speed heal themselves like that, we were told. And they don't age anymore. One of them is very old indeed, and I'm not talking about the geezer."

Anthony exhaled. "All right. So..." He sipped the water provided for him and considered his response. "Sören, Stefan, he made me like him. I was mortally wounded and he forced the change on me to save my life."

"You and he..."

"Yeah, we are."

Pemberton made a noise - it wasn't that he was homophobic, but it was unprofessional to get involved with one's assignment, and frowned upon, though not technically against regulation or a few heads in both MI5 and MI6 would roll. "Give me a reason not to reassign you," Pemberton said. "Or take you off the department altogether."

Anthony was afraid of that - reassignment meant he would very likely never see Sören again, or at least not for a very very long time. But he had his case worked out. "You're welcome to run physical and psychological tests to determine my fitness for service if you think that's necessary. As far as this particular job..." Anthony cocked his head to one side. "I know them well, above and beyond what information a psychological profile can provide. We have an established relationship of trust. They tell me things. As you can see, they even brought me on holiday as part of the family which was a damn good thing considering what happened. If you take me off this assignment and send me wherever, and assign another agent, you're going to destroy their trust. You're going to destroy their trust badly enough that they very likely will go off our radar - Lauer had connections before Ingmar Borovkov made arrangements on their behalf - and they are exactly the kind of people who we need to keep an eye on, both with the kind of power they have and the kind of power their enemies have. And there's another advantage. With an agent who's... not immortal... you'd need to replace them every so often, depending on the age and condition of the agent and... whatever incidents they run into. I can stay with them long-term. I can report to you long-term, and I will, if you keep me on permanent assignment."

"It's unorthodox. It's unprecedented."

"This entire fucking situation is unorthodox and unprecedented."

Pemberton took a moment, considering, and finally he nodded, making a grunt. He extended his hand. "You have a deal."

"Thank you." Anthony shook his hand.

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Sören was waiting for Anthony in a makeshift lobby with steel chairs, and rose as Anthony walked in. Anthony went right to Sören's open arms and hugged him tight, getting choked up in the hug, knowing how close they'd come to never holding each other again.

But a tension still hung between them as a driver took them back to the ranch in Ceduna. Sören looked out the window, not saying anything, and Anthony could barely believe any of this was real, that he was alive, mostly unharmed - he still hurt all over, but it could be far, far worse. Then when they got out at the ranch, Anthony's footsteps were leaden, feeling the sadness in the air from meters away, the collective grief and horror of the family. It was like stepping into the carnage of a war zone.

Margrét was no longer staying in one of the rooms at the guest house - she couldn't bear to sleep in the bed after what happened to Frankie - so she was sleeping in the living room of the main house. Anthony was invited to take the room Margrét and Frankie had been staying in, and while a real bed was easier on his aching body than sleeping in an air mattress in a tent, he still felt odd about taking the bed. Nonetheless, he welcomed Sören and Dooku transferring his belongings there.

Anthony was still exhausted from the pain he was in, and the stress of waking up and knowing everything had changed... just the stress of knowing he hadn't hallucinated Galadriel's visit, yet another confirmation that all of this business with past lives was real. Though he didn't want to be rude, he declined dinner with the family, just wanting to nap for awhile.

"Awhile" meant he woke up a little after midnight, feeling hungover though he hadn't touched a drop of alcohol. He went to the bathroom, and when he got back to the bedroom Craig was on the bed. Before Anthony could reach out to pet him, Craig got down. Anthony lay back, and a moment later he felt Craig hop back on the bed and something drop on his face - a toy mouse. "Prrp?"

Anthony laughed and gave Craig some pettings, relieved by the normalcy of it... and then undone. He didn't know why that particular little thing made him break, but there he was, falling apart, ribs aching from the strength of his tears.

Sören walked in. "Hey."

"Hi."

Sören sat on the edge of the bed. "You're not OK."

"No."

"You want to talk about it?"

"I don't know how. It's just... everything." Anthony rubbed his face and sat up. "I'm... like you now. Immortal."

Sören nodded.

"Don't get me wrong, I'm..." Anthony took Sören's hand and kissed it. "I'm glad we're going to get a chance to stay together. MI6 permanently assigned me to you, but... now I get to move around from place to place with you for fear of not alarming the locals with lack of aging, and I'm not sure how I feel about that. And... I'm worried about how the world will change, with climate change, watching more countries fall apart, more wars, how that will affect our lives, where we can go, what we can do... And if MI6 ever falls and information ends up in the wrong hands, or MI6 decides the paranormals they let live freely but under surveillance should be less free... I don't want to be imprisoned, locked in a cage, for life. I..."

Sören pursed his lips. "Are you pissed off at me for making you immortal?"

Anthony wasn't going to lie. "Yes. No. Yes and no."

Sören's fists and teeth clenched. His voice was a snarl. "*Excuse me* for saving your fucking life. *Excuse me* for not letting you *die* after I watched another one of my partners die right in front of me -"

"*Sören.*" Anthony gave him a stern look. He could feel the temperature rising in the room. More softly, but still firmly, he said, "Sören. Please. Let's... let's not fight."

"You're acting like I did something wrong. What was I supposed to do? Was I supposed to just let you die?"

"No, but -"

"There is no but." Sören was livid. He got up from the bed. "I'm sorry I didn't ask you first 'hey, do you want to be immortal and stuff?' OK? You were kind of out of it." He started to sing to the tune of "Do You Want To Build A Snowman?" from *Frozen*. "*Do you want to be immortal? C'mon, let's do the thing! Manwë is a stupid bore, let's not show up at Námo's door, we're the once and future kings...*"

Anthony tried not to laugh. Then Sören got serious again - humor whiplashing into rage tinged with grief. "I'm *fucking sorry*, OK? Since the medics took you and you pulled through, when I knew you would have probably died if I didn't intervene, I've been struggling with this too, how this is going to impact your life. Worrying about the future. But I'd do it again, because I love you. I couldn't just let you die without doing *something.* Maybe that's selfish, I don't know. I just know that I love you."

Anthony sighed. He patted the bed. Sören hesitated, then he climbed on next to him.

Anthony was going to try to say something reassuring - he *did* still love Sören, and there *was* a part of him that was happy at the thought of spending eternity with the man he loved, rather than reincarnating over and over again and *hoping* he'd find his way back to Sören each time, that the Valar or Odin or Sauron or someone else wouldn't interfere to keep them apart. But emotions got in the way of words. He didn't want to hurt Sören with the part of him that was irritated by the gift of immortality in a world like this, not when Sören had lost so much, not when the most recent loss was so raw. He couldn't bear to see Sören upset, like adding insult to the injury of the trauma endured just a couple days

ago. Anthony fell apart again, sobbing on Sören's shoulder. Sören pulled him close and started to cry too.

They held each other, rocking and crying. Like their tears were bleeding out. Not just the horror of what had happened two days ago, but the horror of losing each other long ago, the way everything had gone to hell back then... the fear that history would repeat itself, somehow. There was relief that they had survived this latest ordeal, they still had each other - Anthony could stand and fight with them now, in a better position to do so than before he'd been given immortality. But there was still so much uncertainty, and they clung to each other like two frightened children, both glad to be alive and yet worried death wasn't the worst thing they could deal with. There had been *so much.* Too much. It wasn't over yet.

After a few minutes there was a gentle knock at the door and a deep, velvet voice. "May I come in?"

"Get over here," Sören choked out.

"I'm not... interrupting anything with Maglor?" Anthony bit his lip.

"No, I encouraged Macalaurë to be there for Ali," Dooku said.

Dooku climbed on the other side of Anthony and now his strong arms were around them both. The Finarfin part of Anthony remembered the way Fingolfin used to hold the two of them, a living shield. Dooku's arms tightened around them. "As you know, immortality is a mixed blessing," Dooku said.

Sören started shaking - this time not with tears, but with laughter, silent at first then bubbling out of him. "*As you know*," Sören said, lowering his voice a few octaves.

Anthony lost it too. When he looked at Dooku and saw the sour expression on his face it made him laugh even harder. It hurt. He still couldn't stop laughing.

"I am *trying* to offer *our brother* some *empathy*," Dooku said to Sören. "You needn't interrupt me when I am making an important point -"

"What, no shan't? I'm disappointed," Sören said.

Dooku made a noise and pinched the bridge of his nose. Anthony got the sense Dooku didn't hate it nearly as much as he was pretending to.

Anthony patted him. "I appreciate that you're trying to help, Ñolo." The old name just slipped out of him without much consideration, easy and natural.

Sören skritched Dooku's whiskers, his eyes soft. "You're a good bean."

"I am... I am not *a bean*," Dooku grumbled.

Anthony thought their bantering was adorable - and achingly familiar. He pulled them closer, a little surprised at himself at how comfortable he was with hugging Dooku like this.

Sören pulled up the covers around them, and a few minutes later they were joined by the other cats - Rasputin, Pumpkin, and Snúður, a choir of purring. Snúður came over to touch noses with Anthony and headbutt his face.

"I have wondered at times," Dooku mused softly, "if Ingwion's gift of immortality was intended as a curse. Poison can be used for medicine, and a curse can likewise be transformed into a blessing - we have each other again, and I believe there is power in that. Nonetheless, I can understand reservations about being immortal in the face of a changing, unstable world... seemingly more ominous if we do not fully know the motivations of who granted us immortality. At the time I took Ingwion's blood, I was of the impression he was on our side. But with the way he left..."

And those aiding him. Galadriel's words echoed in Anthony's mind. "Yeah, about that." Anthony exhaled. "There's something you should know. When I was... out... I dreamt about Galadriel."

"Those hairs you asked me to put in the bag..." Sören's eyes widened.

"I asked her for proof, to show that it wasn't just a fever dream as my body was recovering from near death. She said Sauron had help to find us. Not someone among us currently. But that implies..."

"That implies either one of the three who were killed, which is not likely," Dooku said, "or someone we had welcomed as part of the family who... has since departed."

"There are exactly two candidates for the latter," Sören said. "Freyr and Loki."

"I told you not to trust Loki," Dooku muttered.

"OK, could we not with 'I told you so?'" Sören's nostrils flared and his brow furrowed. Then he looked at Anthony. "She didn't give you an exact identification?"

"No. She was at her Mirror when I encountered her which suggests she knows what she does by scrying," Anthony said.

Dooku stroked his beard, looking deep in thought, and then his mouth opened and he sat up. "Loki told us a tale of how he swore blood-brotherhood with Odin. He claimed to be one of us at first, Nerdanel's twin brother, fostered out when he was a youth... captured by Morgoth and turned into a Balrog, which is how Odin found him. Odin freed him and healed him, on the condition he swear fealty. In *hindsight*..." Dooku scowled. "How would Odin have encountered Balrogs? Perhaps he was in league with Morgoth and Sauron all this time."

"If you consider some of the mythology to be like a game of telephone... like the völva called Fëanor Fenrir... that bit in mythology where Odin consults the disembodied head of Mimir? What do you want to bet that's Melkor? Or Mairon?" Sören snarled, looking much like the wolf he had been prophesied to be; Anthony would have found it erotic if he were not so exhausted.

"I would be willing to bet quite a bit, and I only bet on sure things," Dooku said.

"Maybe Loki never stopped being a Balrog," Sören said. "Maybe he was just good at hiding it."

"Or at the very least there was still a connection where Loki informed the Balrogs of where to go." Dooku nodded. "This is... not good."

"*Fokking tíkarsonur.*" Sören threw the covers off and got up, in his pajamas. *'Förum til*

Asgard núna. Og sparka í fokking rassana á þeim -"

Anthony didn't understand a word of that apart from the f-word and "Asgard", but he got the gist. Dooku gently Force pushed Sören back onto the bed and shook his head. "As you know, we just sustained three deaths. We are all... in need of recovery time. It may well be that they expect us to go after them now, when we are weakened. Indeed that looks like an obvious trap from where I sit, to send Balrogs and establish a rather obvious connection to Loki, hoping it would put us on the offensive after that connection was made."

"He's right," Anthony said. "We need to take some time and decompress."

"And not just to regain our strength, but..." Dooku's eyes were sad. He turned to Anthony and said, "Some of Medika's extended family is going to come around in a couple of days. It's custom. As part of the family, we are invited to be there and I feel it is important that we are."

Anthony nodded. Sören nodded too. "Yeah I don't want to... upset Ali and Medika any more than they already are." Sören covered his face with his hands for a minute and sighed deeply. "Jesus..."

"We have been through a lot," Dooku said, "and it's not over yet, but we can only deal with this one step at a time. And right now, the step we need most is to rest. To take what safety and comfort with each other, that we can."

With that, the three men tangled up together in a cuddle-pile, switching places so Dooku was in the middle and Sören and Anthony faced each other, each with access to his shoulders and chest. Sören rubbed his nose in the chest hair visible through Dooku's pajama top, and then he took Anthony's hand. "Try not to hate me," Sören said, looking into Anthony's eyes.

"I don't," Anthony said, touching Sören's cheek. "I love you."

"That's what I needed to hear."

Anthony started to cry again. That got Sören crying too, and Dooku held them, pet them, taking the edge off with his quiet strength. But then, Anthony's brain made a connection that had nothing to do with the enemies they were up against - something so random and crazy that his tears became hysterical laughter, even though it hurt.

"What?" Sören asked.

"You... made me immortal... and..." Anthony wheezed. "Did I ever tell you what my mum's maiden name was?"

Sören shook his head.

"MacLeod."

Sören and Dooku both facepalmed in unison, which made Anthony laugh even harder. "Oh dear," Dooku said.

"So you're Highlander now?" Sören smirked.

Anthony nodded. "Apparently."

"We need to get you a kilt." Sören leered. "But you need to wear it properly, if you know what I mean."

"You have a one-track mind, dear," Dooku said, booping Sören's nose.

"There can be only one," Sören quipped.

Anthony made noises into Dooku's shoulder. "Oh god."

Chapter 42

With legs as heavy as her heart, Ali got out of her brother's jeep, that Darren had let Ali and Maglor borrow for an emergency doctor visit. Ali had woken up that morning with cramps and bleeding, and a drive out to a clinic had confirmed she miscarried, just over three months into her pregnancy.

Ali wanted to just lay down and shut out the world for awhile but she couldn't. Today some of her relatives on her mother's side were coming over for sorry business - aunts, uncles and cousins, and longtime friends who might as well be family. Ali felt bad that her other three brothers couldn't make it - Tom, the youngest, was in prison, and the two middle brothers were in the service and couldn't get leave on such short notice. But even though it would be nice to see people she hadn't seen in a long time, and it was tradition, Ali still felt like being alone.

She resisted the impulse to lay down, knowing if she did that she wouldn't be able to get up again. "I'm going for a walk," she told Maglor.

"Do you want some company?" Maglor shifted his weight from one foot to the other.

She didn't want to tell him "no", even though she did want some alone time before the sorry time started. She knew this was a loss for Maglor as well - there had been a possibility the baby was his, and if it had been Kenny's that was another link to Kenny gone, so either scenario was upsetting. She didn't want to come across like pushing him away; he was grieving too. And Maglor knew how to make himself unobtrusive, to be around without feeling like he was invading space. So Ali nodded. "All right."

The sheep farm was enough acres that a walk around the entire property would take some time, enough time that Ali hoped it would center her and put her in the right frame of mind for receiving guests. She knew the point of sorry business was being allowed to be not OK, to fall apart and be a wreck in the presence of one's family, but her own tendency when she got upset was to isolate and not let anyone see her like this; there was melting down and breaking down, and she feared the latter if she didn't get back some sense of control. Walking was meditative, walking was deep listening, the calm in the eye of the storm. As Ali walked, looking at the big sky, the grasses and scrub, the clusters of trees and stones, hearing the sheep bleat in the distance, it was both a painful reminder of her father, who had loved this land as fiercely as the one he'd departed, and a comforting reminder all at once - part of him still lived on in the life of the farm.

Ali headed for the big rock by a grove of trees towards the center of the farm, where she'd first started sitting as a little girl, trying to get her temper tantrums cooled down. And that was when she heard voices and knew she would not be undisturbed there.

Sören and Anthony were out. Ali knew that they had been trying to keep their Krav Maga practice and running going during the holiday, though she was surprised Anthony was doing anything physical considering he'd almost died just a few days ago and though Ali knew he was now immortal and his body had speed healed from the injuries - which said a lot about the power of the Silmarils, with the way Maglor and Maedhros had been scarred - Ali didn't think Anthony was yet in condition to spar. She wasn't wrong in that assessment - Anthony was sitting in a lawn chair, and Sören...

There were two milk crates on the ground, each with a coffee can on top. There were two milk crates stacked on top of each other in the center, also with a coffee can on top of the

crate. Anthony was holding a trash bag, and there was a box of what appeared to be empty coffee cans sitting next to him. Ali knew that her father had been in the habit of saving empty coffee cans as containers for spare change - they weren't poor, per se, but her parents were frugal - and she got the sense Medika or Darren had given permission for them to have the coffee can collection. Before Ali could ask what the hell they were doing with it, she watched Sören's eyes lock onto the center coffee can, a fierce look on his face as he clenched his jaw and his fists, and the coffee can rose from the crate without being touched. Ali expected to see it fly backwards and hit the ground, but it flew just a foot and then was crushed like someone had stomped on a soda can... except the coffee can was made of stronger material than a pop can.

Then the coffee ripped apart with an awful noise, metal falling to shreds on the ground. Anthony waved his hand and the pieces came flying towards him; he held open the trash bag and used the Force to push the pieces in.

Ali's jaw dropped.

Sören stalked back and forth, looking like the coffee cans had done something to personally offend him.

"Now both of them," Anthony said.

Sören tilted his head to one side, rolled his shoulders, and then he stood and closed his eyes. Both coffee cans rose from the crates, were crushed simultaneously, and ripped in pieces.

When Sören opened his eyes, he watched Anthony waving over the pieces. "I think we're good for now," Anthony said. "Maybe leave this here, come back after the, ah..." Anthony didn't know what to call it.

"Sorry business," Ali supplied.

"What time is it?" Sören asked, his voice monotone, distant.

Anthony checked his watch. "Eleven-thirty."

"One more round," Sören said.

Anthony gave a nod. "You got it." Three coffee cans floated out of the box and towards the crates.

"Stand back," Sören told Maglor and Ali, even though they were already several meters away.

Before Ali could ask - no debris had flown at her when Sören had destroyed the previous set - Maglor grabbed Ali's wrist and pulled her back. Ali watched as Sören took a deep breath - she felt her hair standing on end, a charge building like static - and then the coffee cans exploded with a loud pop. The metal wasn't even like tiny pieces of shrapnel, it just... disintegrated into powder. There was a faint smell of smoke.

Maglor raised an eyebrow, and Ali could feel herself breathing out of her mouth. A chill went through her, and it was not cold outside.

Sören surveyed his handiwork, still looking severe, like he wouldn't mind going several rounds. That shook her up even more than the exploding cans did.

Because she recognized that look in Sören's eyes. It had been the same look in Fëanor's eyes just before he burned the ships.

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Sören looked a bit more sane when he and Anthony joined them inside. Sören washed his hands before he started taking out appetizers and sides Dooku and Medika had worked on together last night, bonding over a mutual love of cooking. Ali needed to sit down, and took a stool in the kitchen - the walk had probably been a bit more than she should have done, after what happened early this morning. Sören knew about the emergency appointment, and he didn't even ask how she was, he simply said, "I'm sorry." His voice was no longer monotone.

Ali nodded and patted him.

Sören gave her a hug. "If there's anything I can do, let me know."

There was - Ali would talk to him about it later - but first... "Actually, I need to ask Anthony a favor."

Anthony was in the living room. Auli and Huan had been moping together, and Anthony was giving them pets and making soothing noises. Sören called Anthony into the kitchen.

Ali took a deep breath. "When we go back..." She shook her head. "The kids can't go back to school yet. They're... not going to be able to handle school for awhile."

"I understand," Anthony said.

Officially, they'd handled the cause of death as a gas explosion. Medika knew the truth, but Ali didn't think it was a wise idea to teach the kids about Balrogs until they were older even if they did remember some of their previous lifetime. She also worried that the kids would slip and tell adults, like teachers or friends' parents, about Balrogs, and that could cause problems. So as much as lying to the kids didn't sit well with her at all, it was the only way Ali knew how to handle the situation.

But even with telling the kids it was gas, the family was still *not normal* and Ali worried that something like talking to a school psychologist would inadvertently result in the kids letting it slip about Force sensitivity, or Maglor being an Elf, or something else. Ali had tried to impress upon the kids things that were "for just us" versus the rest of the world, but she knew that under stress, that could still go by the wayside.

Ali went on. "Even while they're out of school, their school is going to want them to talk to someone. They probably should, considering, you know... they lost their father." Ali pursed her lips. "Does your department have any safe people they can see for therapy?"

"Unfortunately, we do not." Anthony sighed. "I am very, very sorry about that. We have safe physical doctors but as far as mental health services..." Anthony shook his head. "It's something I've tried to impress upon my department, that we need to start training mental health professionals who are capable of dealing with paranormal activity and know the difference between reported psi ability and mental illness, but of course that's easier said than done with traditional psychologist and psychiatric training, so psychiatrists don't start believing every person who claims they're Jesus..."

"Of course." Ali was afraid of that, but she thought it was worth a shot, and she knew it wasn't Anthony's fault.

Anthony folded his arms and leaned against the kitchen counter. "I would recommend attending sessions with a child psychologist, not letting them have sessions alone, in case... certain topics come up by accident."

"OK." Ali nodded.

"Barring that, I would... try to pull them out of school. Maybe... god, I hate suggesting this... leaving Sydney, going someplace more rural where schools are a bit less up the parents' arses."

Ali had been considering that too - staying in Ceduna rather than going back to Sydney, but she hadn't decided yet, and she knew that had potential to divide the family, if Maglor stayed with her... or she would only see Maglor once in a great while, if he went back to Sydney with the others. She didn't want to make him choose, and it was not a conversation she wanted to have anytime soon. She was still planning on returning to Sydney in a few days, and if she went back to Ceduna it would be at a later date. After it was the right time to talk about possibly splitting the family in two. That wouldn't be any time soon, right after the carnage.

Anthony seemed to sense Ali was on edge, and now he offered her a hug, which she accepted. *Uncle Ara always gave the best hugs.* It was like being hugged by a blanket made of light. It made Ali choke up a little, after trying to get calm.

Seeing Ali tear up made Sören start to cry a little, and Ali reached out. Sören joined in the hug, sniffling. "At least I know it's OK to cry when your relatives get here," Sören said.

"Yeh, nobody will judge you," Ali said.

Darren came over and hugged them all. "That's something I don't understand about whitefella funerals. Everybody's expected to act all... prim and proper, like someone hasn't just bloody *died*."

"It's why I fucking hate wakes," Sören said. "They're so *phony.*"

A few minutes later, the guests started arriving. Medika's sister Talia, Ali's cousins Sam and Noah. Talia brought chicken salad wraps and homemade peach pie. Talia and Medika were hugging on the couch, crying, when the next guests arrived - Medika's brother Jarra, who brought a large basket of fresh fruit and gave Ali a fierce hug before going right to his sister. Jarra's kids, Kyle, Conn and Daisy, followed.

Medika's longtime friend Edith and her husband Dan were next, bringing potato salad and tuna-stuffed tomatoes, with fairy bread for the kids. Then Medika's friends Rachael, and Mirra, and her friend Nia and her husband Lorne. The house was getting a bit crowded, with extra chairs and cushions set up in the kitchen.

Ali and Darren made introductions, and Sören and Margrèt proceeded to get hugged by Ali's aunts and uncle and cousins, and then Ali and Darren themselves went through the gauntlet of hugs, and watching Darren break made Ali fall apart too. She had been sitting with the horror of losing her father, losing her husband-to-be, and losing a friend for the last few days - now she had lost a baby as well - but the family surrounding them, like a giant safety net to catch them as they fell, cemented the reality of it, crashing down over

her. It was bad enough to lose Fingon once, but to lose him a second time, and Balrogs *again*...

It was too much. It was all too much. Ali cried and cried, feeling like she was peeling layers of grief, some new way to look at the situation and get angry, feel hopeless, all over again. Even with the family she did have - people she hadn't seen for awhile, people who'd dropped everything and come out when they heard Medika's husband and Ali's partner had died - there was that ache for what had been ripped away, in such a terrible, frightful way. And none of these people, apart from her immediate family, knew the truth of how they'd died - it was the gas explosion story. Ali had a feeling at least some of them would believe it had been a type of demon, but there were the usual cautions and protocols about not circulating information on the paranormal nature of the deaths. It was understandable, and it was still rubbing salt in the wound. It was a hurt that could not be shared, except among the very closest of kin. And having to keep that so private hurt too. A gas explosion was close enough to the way they'd died, but the *why* of it - an ancient grudge of an evil god-like being...

Even surrounded by family, Ali felt lonely, save for a very few. *Us against the world.*

She was going to have to leave here in a few days, go back to Sydney... start trying to move forward, one day at a time. That felt like an impossible hurdle. She was tired. She was bone-tired, soul-deep. And of course, that was when they were at their most vulnerable. She wondered what their enemies would do next, knowing they had been defeated, demoralized. Ali got the sense they weren't going to get much rest and recovery time. She grieved for that, too, weeping with sheer exhaustion, just wanting this to be done...

She thought of the chasm. She thought of her children. If nothing else, she had to try to keep going for them. But it hurt. And what if they were next...

Oh god. Please. No.

Ali felt the vague sense that something was off. There was something missing, and it wasn't the deceased - Medika's oldest living relative, her mother's brother Nat, wasn't here. "Is Uncle Nat not coming?" Ali asked, feeling concerned; she knew Nat had a psych history and he was also fairly old, in his early eighties.

"Fran said they were running late," Talia informed her; Fran was Nat's only daughter.

"OK."

Worrying about Nat snapped Ali back to the immediate present. She was overheated from crying, and decided to step outside for a minute. Dooku was firing up the grill, wanting to be present while also not intruding. Sören followed her out, and Sören started crying again as Dooku held him. "Shhhh, sweetheart," Dooku soothed. "I'm here. I'm right here."

"Fra -" Sören stopped himself from saying the name just in time.

Ali hugged him and now she was crying again too. They'd each lost a partner. They'd each lost the parent of their children.

"I couldn't save her," Sören sobbed. "I had nightmares about her, I had nightmares of her burning up in front of me *on a bloody fucking picnic*, I should have never agreed to go on a picnic -"

"What were you supposed to do, put her in a bubble?" Ali shook her head. "You can't blame yourself. None of us can blame ourselves."

"I feel responsible too," Margrèt said, standing in the back doorway. "If I hadn't gotten hysterical, your father wouldn't have been forced to carry me away. He sacrificed his life for me -"

"That's not your fault either. You saw your wife *die* right in front of you. *Of course* you snapped," Ali said.

"I was useless."

Ali lowered her voice to a whisper. "You killed a fucking Balrog." She gave her cousin a stern look, not wanting Margrèt to start the downward spiral into self-loathing - the Maedhros part of Ali knew all too well where that would lead. "That's not useless. Even if you hadn't... none of what happened is your fault."

"She's right," Dooku said. "The right people to blame are... nowhere near the vicinity." Dooku looked out at the horizon... and beyond. He narrowed his eyes, and Ali thought of Fingolfin facing down Morgoth in single combat. "Our enemies want us to hate ourselves, tear ourselves apart so they can finish off what's left. We must channel whatever hatred and blame we're feeling... and direct it at them."

Ali nodded. "Uncle Ñolo speaks the truth. I've been replaying what happened over and over again and... we could have done this or that differently and still might have ended up with the same deaths, or more death. It's not like you can have an action plan ready for a surprise Balrog ambush."

Margrèt said nothing, but her jaw trembled and she closed her eyes, shuddering as tears spilled down her cheeks. Sören went over to her, grabbed her, and pulled her into a group hug.

"Here," Dooku said, directing Margrèt to skewers and piles of lamb and assorted vegetables. "You can help me assemble the skewers. Perhaps think of it as impaling the hearts of our foes, hm?"

Huan came out, whining. He followed Ali and Sören to a picnic table, where they leaned on each other, crying more softly but still intensely - fathomless depths of grief and rage for what they had lost, what they had endured, and knowing Sauron and the others were out there, waiting for more. But petting Huan was soothing. "You miss him too, don't you?" Ali asked the dog.

Huan whimpered.

Sören broke down again. Ali realized Sören hadn't just lost an uncle, the Fëanor part of him had lost Celegorm all over again. That was, in fact, one of the worst things about the attack - they'd discovered their connections, they'd reunited, just to be ripped apart again. That felt *deliberate.* Like Sauron had waited for just this moment to make his move. Ali's fists clenched.

The back door opened again. Ali expected to see Darren, but the man who stepped out was shorter. Wizened, hobbling with a walking stick. Ali had not seen the man in years but she recognized the shock of fuzzy grey hair, the broad features that still smiled readily when the kind, sad dark brown eyes met hers.

"Uncle Nat." Ali stood up and stretched out her arms.

Nat stopped, looking like he'd seen a ghost. He pointed at Sören, eyes wide, hand shaking. He took a step back. "Y-you. You. *You.*"

Then Nat just started stammering, not able to make words. Ali sensed distress, and Sören looked horrified, like he'd done something to upset Nat and he wasn't sure what it was. Ali didn't know either. Darren also sensed the distress and he stepped in the doorway behind Nat. "Hey, Uncle Nat, let's get some tea," Darren said. He gave them a wary look as he led Nat inside.

"Oh god." Sören slumped, looking like he wanted to crawl under the picnic table and hide. He looked down at his clothes, his shoes, at one arm then the other, and up at Ali. "What happened? What... did I offend him?"

"I don't know what it was. It may not have been anything you've done."

Sören raised an eyebrow. "Is he Force sensitive? Do you think he picked up..." Sören exhaled. "I know this sounds daft, but do you think he, ah... reacted to Flame Imperishable energy or whatever the fuck and it set him off?"

"I don't know. Maybe. But..." Ali sat back next to him and started rubbing his back, not wanting Sören to feel worse than he already did. "OK. Look, this is going to sound... insensitive of me, but you might as well know. Nat was in a mental hospital a few times."

"Oh. Has he got schizophrenia or something -"

"No. Worse." Ali frowned, remembering what her parents had told her almost a year ago. "You know the portals? Nat... went through them. By accident. He got lost for a bit. Between the way that affected him, and the fact that very few people believed him when he got back..."

"Jesus." Sören let out a low whistle. "That poor guy."

"I've been meaning to talk to him about that - actually you could, too, since you've used them - but I also feel like that's a really difficult conversation to have, even if we're verifying he's not crazy. Traumatized, yes, I'm sure, being lost for years. Crazy, no."

"I wonder what the hell he saw." Sören's eyes were sad. "I hope nothing bad happened to him while he was..."

Now Nat was coming back out, arguing with Darren. "I want to talk to him," Nat said. "Let me talk to him. I need to -"

Darren let out an exasperated sigh. "You just met him. He doesn't know you -"

"If he means me, it's fine." Sören cleared his throat, stood up, and put out his hand. "I'm Sör-"

Nat shook hands. "Søren Falkenskjøld."

"Wh... what." Sören blinked.

Ali's heart skipped a beat. That name sounded familiar and she didn't know *why*, and the fact that it sounded familiar at all unsettled her. She braced herself.

"I'm Sören Sigurðsson. I'm Bö -" Sören stopped himself from saying the name aloud, remembering the taboo. "I'm her cousin on her father's side. I'm from Iceland, where her father's from."

"No, you're from Norway." Nat frowned.

Darren gave a nervous laugh. "OK, Uncle Nat, let's go back in. Food is cooking, I'll bring you a plate when it's ready -"

Sören shook his head. "You met another version of me. It's OK, I know about the gates -"

Nat's eyes widened. "You..."

"*Yes.*" Sören nodded. "I came to this country through Uluru, from a gate at the Slave River in Canada, before that from the Dimmuborgir in Iceland. I've also been to the gates at Avebury and Wayland's Smithy."

Well, I guess we're having that conversation about the portals now.

Darren also took a seat. Dooku watched, eyebrows raised. "It sounds like when you got lost, you ended up in a parallel universe, or two," Dooku said.

Sören nodded. "Where did you meet me? Was I in Norway?"

"No, you were in England." Nat frowned. "And it wasn't just where I met you. It was when."

Sören cocked his head to one side.

"I traveled in time, or at least that's what it looked like," Nat said. "When I got lost it was the 1970s, but when I met you, it was the 1940s, World War II was happening and you were with the Norwegian Resistance, helping the British forces. You were with a guy in there..." Nat pointed to the house. "But he had short hair, and he was calling himself Mark, not Marcus..."

Glamour. Ali couldn't picture Maglor with short hair at all, ever, but she knew it had been a necessary disguise in the earlier part of the 20th century, when long hair on men was not socially acceptable.

"I remember your surname because I saw it on your uniform, and you helped me figure out how to get home," Nat said. "Thank you."

Sören's jaw dropped. Now Sören couldn't make words, only noises in response.

Ali didn't even know what to think about that, except it seemed like maybe different universes ran on different time zones - which made sense, if different universes occupied different spaces of a multiversal matrix. It still blew her mind to think that some of them might have incarnated earlier in time, like being old enough to live through World War II.

That also implied at least one universe where their family never left Norway for Iceland. Ali wondered if she would even exist in that world, or at least, as herself. She didn't want to think about that.

The day had gotten a whole lot weirder.

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Much to Ali's relief - and most likely everyone else's - Nat didn't bring up the portals once they got back in the main house and the sorry business continued. Nat did, however, give very long hugs on his way out, and he quietly thanked Sören again.

When the guests were gone, Ali was ready to just go the fuck to bed and escape into sleep for awhile, but Ali needed to bring up something with Sören, and it happened that Anthony wanted to call a family meeting for some reason. Ali and Darren followed them to the guest house, giving each other confused looks. Ali felt on edge, wondering why Anthony, of all people, wanted a family meeting. That seemed ominous.

Sören and Dooku took care of feeding the cats, who acted like they had been neglected for days rather than a few hours, yowling in stereo. Once they were all seated, and the cats were busy eating, Anthony gestured to Ali. "I know you have something to discuss with Sören, so you might as well go first. Though... if you need privacy -"

"I don't, because it's something that will probably affect all of you." Ali took a deep breath and looked Sören in the eye. "What you did to him." Ali looked at Anthony, then back at Sören. "Give it to me."

Sören blinked and sat back. He tried to keep his expression neutral but his eyes were wide; Ali could tell she shocked him.

"I've been thinking about it since everything happened," Ali said. "I know that it's only been a few days and that probably doesn't seem long enough to make a decision like that, but also after what happened, I don't know that we have the luxury of being able to afford to wait long periods of time and consider things very carefully. I feel like we're living on borrowed time now, those of us who aren't immortal, and -"

Sören put up a hand. "You're very sure."

Ali nodded. "I know it seems counter-intuitive, considering I just lost one of my partners, and my father. I won't be reunited in an afterlife, I'll have to wait for when they're reincarnated again. Or if." Ali rubbed her face, not wanting to think about that. "But..." Ali looked at Maglor. "This way we can stay together. And I'm one less person who can be so easily lost, and bring more pain, more grief, more loss of hope, in the losing." Ali sat up straight and tall. "I'm in a better position to help you fight."

"OK." Sören nodded. He pursed his lips - Ali could tell he wasn't completely enamored of the idea, since immortality did come with its own set of complications; Ali was going to have to move around like they were, given time, and she knew eternity was a very long time to live with trauma, Maglor being living proof of that, and they weren't guaranteed happiness in an ever-changing, chaotic world. Nonetheless, Ali knew Sören *respected* her, and wasn't going to fight her on it. Sören turned to Darren then. "What about you?"

Darren pointed to himself, mouthing "me?" and then he looked around the room - Ali would have found his sudden deer-in-the-headlights reaction amusing if the situation were not so gravely serious. "Uh." Darren coughed and then he shrugged. "I know my sister says time is a luxury, but I do need more time to consider something like that, myself. Because no take backs, right? I don't want to ask for it and end up regretting it later. I want to be able to help you guys fight, too. But, I'm not even thirty and I've seen some things. I'm not sure I want to live to be three hundred, three thousand, with my mind scarred even

worse than it is."

"That's fair," Sören said.

"Very," Maglor said.

"It's a standing offer. I doubt - or at least I hope - this isn't the last time we'll see each other." Sören tried to smile, but his eyes were too haunted. Ali knew he was thinking of Frankie, his mind's eye watching her burn again.

Anthony put an arm around Sören's shoulders, and Dooku put his hand on Sören's knee. Sören covered Dooku's hand with his, and kissed Anthony's cheek. In spite of what an emotional rollercoaster ride this day had been, and Ali feeling all tapped out, she couldn't help but smile a little as Anthony turned pink. *They're so cute.* She was glad they had each other; she imagined Sören would be a lot worse off now if he didn't have them. As it was, what she had seen in his eyes earlier that day...

Ali shivered again.

The softness in Anthony's eyes faded as he got in "serious business" mode. "All right. You're probably wondering why I called you all here."

"Is this to do with MI6 protocols, or something?" Darren asked.

"No," Anthony said, "though that was a fair assumption." Anthony cleared his throat, and everyone watched as he pulled a small, clear plastic bag out of his pocket. Ali wondered why the hell he was calling a meeting about a plastic bag, and then, as he took out the contents, she saw it wasn't about the bag but what was in it. It was three long, thin strands of something - metallic like wire, but more like the consistency of hair. The hair flashed in his hand... pale gold in one direction, silver in the other. Ali's mouth opened - no human hair was like that.

"While I was unconscious, and my body was healing from what should have been mortal wounds, I had an unsettling dream. I was visited by my daughter." Anthony's eyes narrowed. "I asked her for proof that this was a genuine visitation and not my brain hallucinating, having a fever dream during the healing process, hence the hair. Because the visitation was to deliver a message. Well, a series of messages."

"Did she come to say that if we were good and groveled at the Valar, they would protect us from the big bad Balrogs?" Ali sneered; there had been no love lost between Galadriel and Fëanor's sons.

"No," Anthony said. "Actually, about that..." Anthony took Sören's chin in his hand. "She told me to tell you that you were right. That she has seen the corruption of the Valar. She also told me to tell you that you made some mistakes -"

"Of course." Sören rolled his eyes.

"But considering the bad blood between you two, the fact that she is willing to concede to being wrong about the Valar... and she changed her mind about the nature of our relationship..."

Sören looked down at the hairs in Anthony's hand. "No wonder you asked her for proof. I'd be convinced I was hallucinating too."

"Yeah. It also seems rather... telling... that she gave me three hairs. I think she meant them for you." Anthony gave them to Sören. Sören took them gingerly, staring at them with wide eyes, open mouth, breathing a little harder as he watched the way they shone silver, then gold.

To make more Silmarils, if the need arises. A chill went through Ali. *She knows what they can do, and she's preparing for war.*

Confirming her suspicion, Anthony went on, "She says she's been forming a resistance in Valinor. But... there's a certain strategy she's trying to implement and that's... the other message. And the one least likely to be received well, so before I say it, please, *please* understand I'm delivering this on *her* behalf, so if you have any issues with what I'm about to say, I am not the person to yell at."

Sören patted him.

Anthony exhaled. "*As you know*, a very long time ago, Fëanor made me go back, after the Doom was pronounced. I was reluctant to do so, but I did, I pretended to repent, and it is probably because of this, that Galadriel can work on undermining the Valar from within, because my bloodline is not held in the same contempt. Well... Galadriel thinks that one of us should take the Straight Road back to Aman and pretend to repent -"

"*What.*" Sören's nostrils flared. "That sounds like a trap -"

"She claims that the Valar promised to show mercy and not punish. Her strategy for whoever is willing to take this journey, is that you can bear false testimony - it is possible to shield one's mind against them - and thus give the Valar wrong information about what our group is up to. They know we were attacked, but from what I gather they don't know everything that's going on. Making the Valar think we're not planning things that we're planning, like dealing with Odin at some point... well, that seems like it would buy us some time, since their ability to meddle with us directly is compromised if they don't have an accurate picture of our strengths and weaknesses. And though she says the Valar have agreed to show mercy, she still believes they will gloat about the attack - I think they would gloat about any other suffering endured during one's incarnation in Middle-Earth - and she hopes this would put a bad taste in more people's mouths, get more Elves willing to rise up."

There was a long silence, with everyone considering.

Finally, Dooku spoke. "That is not a terrible strategy."

"It's a brilliant strategy," Sören said. "I also fucking hate it. We already lost three people. We -"

"I'll go," Margrèt said, quietly.

For a moment you could hear a pin drop. Ali wasn't sure what she was expecting out of the discussion, but it wasn't that.

When Margrèt spoke again, her voice was louder, more sure. "I'll take the Straight Road and go back to Aman. I have to do *something*. If you're after eternity, the only way to ensure it won't be utter *shit* is to undo the Doom. And the only way to do that is to overthrow the Valar. Whatever other gods we've pissed off, our problem was with them first. It will be easier - not easy, but easier - to take down the Valar if there are people working from inside Aman. Galadriel's resistance has a better shot of working if we go with

her plan. The Valar can gloat to me about... her." Margrèt was careful not to speak the name of the dead. "At least my grief will matter for something if some of the Eldar see they have no heart."

"Margrèt." Sören's voice was husky with emotion. "Only if you're absolutely sure. Just because Galadriel thinks one of us should go, doesn't mean any of us has to go. Nobody will be angry with you or think you're useless, you're not doing enough, if you stay -"

"I said I'll go, and I mean that." Margrèt set her jaw. "This is the way." She looked at the clock, then back at her brother. "I'll leave at sunrise."

Ali reached over and hugged her tight. She would miss her cousin, and she admired Margrèt's bravery - the willingness to take the chance that it wasn't a trap, and endure however much time living in the gilded cage of Aman that it would take for her family to gain enough power to fight the eldest gods; Ali thought it would be at least a few years. Maybe longer. Ali didn't know if they would ever be ready, but she knew at some point Sören was going to do it or die trying.

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Sören spent his last night with his sister cuddling on the couch in the living room of the guest house, and looked like hell as they gathered in the pre-dawn twilight. Ali had at least gotten some sleep, but it hadn't been enough. Still, this was the sacrifice they were willing to make to see Margrèt off properly.

Sören greeted Ali with a thermos of hot coffee. "I have something for you," he said.

Ali unscrewed the thermos, wondering what it was, and then realized it should have been more obvious when Sören took out a knife, cut his finger and let it drip into the coffee. Ali couldn't help snickering at Sören adding his blood to *coffee*, which was so very him. Ali drank, and her eyes met Anthony's, who gave her an encouraging nod.

Margrèt went down the line to hug everyone - Maglor, then Dooku, then Darren, Ali, and Anthony. She lingered as she pulled back from Anthony, looking at him with a mixture of amusement and sadness. "You were the baby and now you're the one taking care of us." Margrèt tousled his hair. "You know..." She chuckled. "The völva didn't just turn Fëanor into Fenrir, but I got turned into Hel, I guess, because I'm a goth. Or... was. I... don't expect I'll be affecting that look much, where I'm going. Anyway, I bring that up because I remember when I was Findis, you used to follow me around a lot and I called you my puppy dog. So that makes you Garmr, Hel's dog."

Anthony smiled. Huan barked as if he approved.

"Be a good guard dog now," Margrèt said, tweaking Anthony's nose.

She and Sören hugged tight as the first blush of dawn tinged the sky, quickly burning scarlet. They both shed silent tears - Ali could feel Sören's heart breaking all over again, now both his siblings would be gone, and Ali ached for him, tears stinging her own eyes. "I'm gonna miss you," Margrèt said, leaning in to kiss his brow.

Sören gave a sad smile. "Hi Gonna Miss You -"

Margrèt facepalmed, made noises, and then gave him a playful shove. Before he could

shove her back, she grabbed him, put him in a headlock, and gave him noogies. Ali laughed through her tears, but seeing them banter like this one last time just made it hurt even more.

Then Margrèt took a deep breath. She looked out at the dirt road, and back at her family. She walked out to the road, and took her first few steps. As the sky continued to fill with color - hot pink, orange, gold - Ali saw the air on the road shimmer, like a heat mirage, and then it started to sparkle, like someone had thrown glitter. Ali watched as the landscape on either side of the road ahead was suddenly lifted like a curtain - the road began to glow gold, and where grassland and a few stray trees had been, there were groves of flowering trees, each tiny blossom looking like it was made of light, and the sunrise sky was replaced by a swirling mist of white light. Ali's knees wobbled and Maglor reached to steady her. Ali's heart hammered in her ears as she watched Margrèt suddenly transfigured - her hair had already been long, to her waist, and now it fell all the way to her calves, turning in an instant from its dyed purple to a natural raven black. Her ears were suddenly pointy, and she glowed silver the way Maglor did. Margrèt came to where the road began to glow gold, the outback had turned into flowering trees in a haze of light, and she walked more slowly, looking down at her glowing hands and around at the changed world as if she couldn't believe what she was seeing. A few more steps and the veil fell once more, the street the way it had been, restored to the South Australian countryside, the blazing sunrise... and Margrèt was gone.

Sören's sobs rang out, echoing. Dooku and Anthony held him, shedding their own tears - both for missing another one of their own, and concern for what Margrèt might face in Aman, if the Valar did not uphold their promise to Galadriel... and also for the sheer mind-breaking reality of what they had just witnessed, Margrèt's transformation back to her original form as Findis, and the way the Straight Road had appeared, the beauty of it even as they all knew where it led was a place of poison... a place none of the rest of them wanted to return.

Ali continued to feel shaky, head spinning, and she realized it wasn't entirely from what she had just seen, and it wasn't too much caffeine. She felt too hot, and her body replayed the same sensation of gravity building that she'd felt in a plane taking off. Sören's blood was starting to do its thing. "I need to sit down," Ali slurred, just before she hit the ground.

Chapter 43

As their house in Sydney came into view, Sören felt ice in his stomach. That feeling only got worse as they got out of the car - the rented RVs had been returned, and Sören had gone from the rental to home in Maglor's Bentley - and made their way from the carport into the house.

Sören had hoped that going home after the holiday-turned-nightmare in Ceduna would help restore a feeling of normalcy. Of course, they couldn't get over the losses they'd sustained overnight, nor should they. But Sören knew from past experience how easy it was to fall down the pit of depression and just stay *stuck*, inert, and if only for the sake of his children he needed to try to avoid that place, which meant moving forward, keeping on one step at a time. Going home, back to familiar surroundings and their usual routines and habits... that was grounding, stabilizing, what they needed after the ordeal. Or so he'd thought. As Sören walked into the living room, he resisted the urge to run right back out and insist they drive back to Ceduna.

This place is haunted.

Even though they'd been living in the mansion in Sydney just under a year, there were already too many memories here of Kenny, who'd been living with them since spring, and Frankie, who came to visit. Rather than finding that comforting, a tangible connection to them, it just felt like pouring salt in the wound.

Sören tried to give it a chance, hoping that feeling would dissipate once he'd been back for a few hours and his mind got re-adjusted to what had been their home, their sanctuary. But the feeling just got stronger the longer time went on. Stronger as he unpacked. Stronger as the cats went free from their carriers, his daughters and son settled into the nursery. Strong enough that as Sören sat on the couch in the living room with his feet up, Pumpkin purring on his lap, the thought came to him: *We need to move.* Sören felt guilty about that - they hadn't had to pay for this place even though they could have afforded it with the money Ingwion left them, MI6 had footed the bill to ensure their comfort and privacy; he didn't want to ask Anthony to make MI6 pay for another house - but he couldn't shake the feeling nonetheless. For all he'd thought coming home was exactly what they needed to try to regain their bearings, now it felt like the worst possible thing they could have done. Everything just felt *wrong*.

Before they'd left Ceduna, Sören had considered holding a family meeting and asking Medika and Darren if they could stay, but he felt like it would be rude to impose such a major change right after his uncle's death. Even so, he regretted not asking now as he moved the cat over to the other couch pillow so he could get up and go to the bathroom, once again reminded of Kenny, of Frankie, as he rose. As he walked to the bathroom he recalled the wards on the sheep ranch - of course they didn't extend far beyond that, so they had still been vulnerable at the seaside picnic. But here, he felt like they were naked, exposed. Paranoid that it would be just a matter of time before something else happened. Sauron had drawn blood, and now all of their enemies could smell it.

When he finished his business, Sören washed his hands and splashed cold water on his face, taking some deep breaths in the mirror, trying to calm down. He didn't like that faraway look in his eyes, shell-shocked. Coming home and feeling this paranoid was the opposite of moving forward - threatening to send him backwards, into that bad place he was in after he felt another universe's Dagorath - but he didn't know what to do.

He came back to find Anthony putting Craig back in his carrier. "I should head to my flat before it gets much later," Anthony said. "After two weeks, I've got to go grocery shopping, probably dust and vacuum." He made a face at the chores waiting for him.

Dooku cleared his throat, where he was chopping potatoes in the kitchen while fish defrosted. He looked at Anthony, then back at Sören. Sören thought Dooku was going to insist Anthony stay for dinner, but instead Dooku asked, "Sören, why don't you go with him?" *I know you're not doing well,* Dooku spoke into his mind.

Sören put a hand on his hip. He was reluctant to leave his kids just for one night, not only because he didn't want to pawn off his responsibility on Dooku and Maglor, but he'd been rather obsessively looking in on them, clinging to them, since what happened, apart from sleeping and his insistence on doing sessions to learn to weaponize his use of the Force - he'd felt pathetic and ineffective with the way he'd only been able to kill one Balrog by Force choking it, trying to choke others and losing his grip when his concentration broke. Sören felt guilty about leaving the kids behind, *what if something happens to them, what if something happens to me -*

Dooku seemed to pick up on that too, and added, *You need to be able to go away for a night and see that they're fine. Really. This is to help you.*

Sören let out a little sigh but he nodded, not wanting to argue with Dooku. "If you don't mind me tagging along," he said to Anthony.

"Never," Anthony said. He gave Sören a little kiss. "Thank you," he said to Dooku.

Dooku nodded.

Sören felt another twinge of guilt - this time for feeling relief he didn't have to spend the night in the house with Kenny's and Frankie's energy lingering, feeling like it would keep him up all night, his mind replaying the horror over and over again. Feeling guilt that he hadn't had the talk about not coming back. Before he could start yet another round of being angry with himself, Anthony put an arm around Sören, picked up the cat carrier, and began walking them to the door.

Just before they got to the door, Sören froze. He made the "wait here" gesture, and then he headed to where he, Maglor and Dooku kept their swords. He came back with the sword he'd forged himself.

"You... you're bringing your sword with you." Anthony narrowed his eyes.

Sören nodded. "If I'd brought it to Ceduna, maybe -"

Anthony pinched the bridge of his nose. "You need to stop that beating yourself up shit. We've all been over this. We don't know what we could have done differently that would have made a difference, or made things worse." He gestured to Sören's sword. "We don't know that you having *a sword at a bloody picnic* would have saved anybody or not."

"I don't. But I know after what I went through... what *we all* went through... I'm not taking my chances anymore. This comes with me or I'm staying home." Sören glared to make his point.

Anthony looked like he was going to argue, and Sören could hear the unvoiced *Erring on the side of paranoia is literally* what I fucking do for a living *and I still think you're being irrational, but... if it makes you feel safer...* Anthony exhaled, looked down, and then he

nodded, meeting Sören's eyes. "You're not bringing that into the supermarket, though. You can't."

"It can stay in the car while we shop, but *I am* bringing it up to your flat."

"OK." Anthony put an arm around him again, and Sören could feel that he was *sad*... that it had come to this, gotten this bad. But at least Anthony got it that Sören needed to feel like he had some control, and this was right now, the only way. Anthony's arm tightened around him as they headed to the carport.

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The grocery shopping trip was what Sören needed to feel a sense of normalcy, something completely mundane and uneventful after the non-stop ride of paranormal happenings and horrors. Besides food for the next few days, Anthony picked up a rotisserie chicken and a Greek salad for their meal that night.

When they got up to the flat, Anthony let Craig out of the carrier. Sören put the sword by the door, and sat down, watching Craig sniff around. Anthony went in the hall closet and retrieved the vacuum cleaner. "I can dust," Sören offered.

"No," Anthony said. "Sit. Relax. I'll take care of it."

Craig joined Sören on the couch and Sören fussed over him as Anthony dusted, then vacuumed the flat. When those chores were done, Anthony went around the flat and opened windows - it was a warm spring night, and the place had been closed up for two weeks. Then he fixed plates of chicken and bowls of salad, and opened a can of cat food and dish it out. Craig was sniffing around the flat some more as Anthony sat down to eat, and a few minutes later Craig walked over to his dish, sniffed the new food, turned up his nose at his food and came over to the couch to beg. Sören couldn't help laughing. With an exasperated sigh, Anthony got up in mid-chew and Craig followed him back to the kitchen; Anthony put out a small plate of cat treats and Craig gobbled them up.

Now Craig was interested in his own food, and Anthony shook his head as he watched the cat practically inhale his food. "Spoilt," he said.

"He has you trained." Sören smiled.

"He's a brat." Anthony gave Sören a pointed look. "I seem to have a habit of acquiring bratty boys."

Sören batted his lashes, giving Anthony an innocent look that wasn't, and nibbled on a piece of chicken.

They ate their fill, and then curled up together, watching TV, or at least, giving the appearance of watching. In the warmth and strength of Anthony's arms, Sören's mind wandered, dropping its hypervigilant guard for just a little while, cares of the world draining away... *everything* draining away. Then Sören was aware of Anthony changing the channel while commercials were on, which brought his attention back to the present. One of the channels Anthony flipped through had the American cartoon *South Park*, and for a minute they watched before Anthony made the connection maybe this wasn't the best thing right now. But it was too late. Before he could change the channel -

"Oh my god, they killed Kenny! You bastards!"

"Oh god." Anthony turned the television off entirely. "Oh god, Sören, I'm sorry -"

But to the surprise of them both, Sören burst out laughing. It was completely inappropriate - almost as bad as laughing at a funeral - and he couldn't help it. It made him laugh even harder to know Kenny would have wanted this, Kenny being an avid fan of *South Park*, something he and Sören had watched many times. Kenny would have wanted his family to find *some* small bit of humor, as Kenny himself had been full of laughter and jokes, ready to cheer up anyone who was down.

Anthony laughed with him, facepalming.

Then the laughter turned to crying. Because Kenny's death wasn't a laughing matter, and it still hurt. They had been reunited with Fingon just to have him ripped away. Even without being Fingon, Kenny had been a source of sunshine, and one more light was taken away from them. Not just a death, but a horrible death, eerily evocative of the way Fingon had died before. The attack seemed calculated to make them suffer as much as possible, and suffer Sören did now, feeling that raw, tender wound lanced all over again, bleeding out through hysterical, fierce tears that made Craig come over with a concerned "Prrrp?", rubbing against him, headbutting, kneading and purring.

Anthony pulled Sören close; Sören could feel Anthony shaking with tears of his own, silent at first, then with Sören buried against his chest he gave in to louder weeping. Sören held him tight, needing to feel him, and they rocked together, grieving.

Sören knew it wasn't just the terrible carnage, the trauma of it, that made Anthony cry. He knew Anthony was still wrapping his head around the fact that he was immortal now, that he had survived something even an Elf could have died of because the blood of the Flame Imperishable saved him. Sören knew that while Anthony didn't want to be angry with him, it was still an adjustment, Anthony still wasn't completely OK with the way his life was going to change, and continue to change. Sören couldn't blame him for that. He couldn't let Anthony die, but he knew what he'd done had consequences.

"I'm sorry," Sören wept. "I'm sorry. I fucked up your life -"

"You didn't fuck up my life."

"I forced immortality on you, and you got caught up in *this fucking shit* -"

"Sören." Anthony picked Sören's head up and looked him in the eye. "*I love you.* We're in this together. I don't blame you for what *those fucks* did. As far as everything else..." Anthony pet Sören's curls, kissed his brow, touched his cheek. "I don't hate you for making me immortal. I'd be lying if I said I thought it was an unmixed blessing, but -"

Sören sobbed harder. "I couldn't lose you. But I know I might lose you anyway, if you come to hate me..." Sören remembered his life as Fëanor, and being abandoned by Nerdanel. The heated arguments with Fingolfin and Finarfin...

"*Sören.*" Anthony was kissing his tears now. "No, Sören, I don't hate you... I couldn't hate you. Not even then."

Sören's jaw trembled. The sobs wracked him, doubling over in pain. "Please don't leave me." He hated being this *needy*, but there it was. He needed. He held onto Anthony like his life depended on it, like Anthony was a life preserver in the stormy sea of his rage and

grief. "Don't leave me..."

"Sweetheart, you've got me." Anthony kept kissing his tears. He slid his lips down Sören's nose, kissed the tip of Sören's nose. Then Anthony grabbed Sören's face and kissed him hard and hungry, like his kiss was an oath to never leave again.

They kissed and kissed, savoring each other's lips, and the sensual play of their tongues. After a few kisses their tongues licked together before their lips crushed together again, deep, the promise of being inside each other, getting lost together. Anthony moved in like he was going to kiss Sören again and pulled back just a little to tease, giving Sören one of those meaningful looks, lust in his eyes. Their lips brushed again, and Anthony drew Sören's lower lip into his mouth, sucking on it, before his mouth claimed Sören's again, tongues tangling. Sören heard himself whimper into the kiss - he felt almost like he could come just from kissing Anthony, cock hard and throbbing, mindless with want. Anthony pushed him back on the couch, settling over him, their hard cocks grinding together through their jeans as Anthony kissed him again, more insistently.

Kiss after kiss sent fire through Sören's veins, balls tightening, hole twitching. His head spun and his heart pounded in his ears, caught up in the rush of wanting so fiercely. It had been several days since the last time Sören had sex - since before the attack, feeling like he was being disloyal to Frankie's memory to go there so soon - but now he was starving for it, consumed by passion. Anthony's lips and tongue worked their wicked magic against his, making him crazy, needier by the second. Hearing Anthony's ragged breath, feeling his fevered skin as the kisses intensified made Sören buck underneath him, letting out another whimper. He started unbuttoning Anthony's shirt, hearing his breath hitch as he saw the first hint of Anthony's chest hair, could smell his musk more clearly. Then Anthony's mouth was on his neck, kissing, licking, knowing how sensitive Sören was there. Sören cried out, gripping Anthony tight, bucking against him again. Grinding harder. "Anthony, please..."

Anthony nibbled on Sören's neck. "Please, what?"

"Fuck me..."

Anthony laughed softly and licked where his teeth had been, then kissed and licked his way up Sören's throat. When his lips were on Sören's again he was rough, then sensual, playful, pulling back to brush his lips against Sören's before their mouths met again, tongues slowly stroking together. Anthony reached down to palm the bulge in Sören's jeans and Sören's cock jolted, starting to drip precum.

Anthony got up, took Sören's hands and dragged him off the couch. They spent a moment in each other's arms, kissing deeply, and then Anthony yanked off Sören's shirt. With trembling hands, Sören undid the buttons of Anthony's shirt, running his hands over Anthony's chest, enjoying the look and feel of his chest hair, before peeling the shirt off. Anthony undid their jeans and they stepped out of them, naked down to their socks. Sören licked his lips at the sight of Anthony's cock, hard and flushed pink. Before he could get down on his knees and suck, Anthony lifted a leg, pulled off a sock, then the other. Then he took Sören's hands again and led him down the hall. Anthony walked into the bathroom and started the shower, and gave Sören an expectant look. Sören took off his own socks, flung them into the pile of their clothing in the living room, and followed Anthony into the bathroom.

Underneath the hot water they held each other, kissing, cocks rubbing together. They took turns lathering each other, caressing, worshiping each other's bodies. Sören melted into Anthony's touch as Anthony shampooed his curls, massaging his scalp as he did.

Sören felt almost ready to come again as Anthony took both their cocks into his fist to soap them, stroking them together, kissing Sören passionately, his free hand playing with a pierced nipple.

Anthony got on his knees right there, his eyes locked with Sören's as he took Sören's cock in his mouth. Sören leaned against the shower wall, gasping, panting, as the filthy sweetness of Anthony's mouth enveloped him. Anthony sucked him slowly, knowing just how to build the tension and drive Sören mad with pleasure. After a moment Anthony pulled Sören's cock out to lick it, kiss up and down the shaft, and the smug, got-you-where-I-want-you look in Anthony's eyes was as sexy to Sören as anything. When Anthony drew Sören's cock back into his mouth he sucked harder, faster, getting into it, devouring him. Sören clutched Anthony's head and thrusted into his mouth, not able to help himself, getting closer and closer. Just before Sören felt like he was about to fly off that edge and come in Anthony's mouth, Anthony pulled back, took Sören's hips, and began guiding him. "Turn around," he rasped.

Sören turned to face the shower wall, and immediately had to grab a hold of it as Anthony's tongue began to lick at his freshly clean passage in slow, deliberate strokes, then faster, tongue fucking. Sören heard himself make a feral snarl as Anthony's tongue slowed down again, teasing. Sören felt like he was going to die of the pleasure, ready to explode, he needed to come so badly. Anthony's clever tongue kept him on that edge, taking him deeper, electrifying him with each lash. "Oh god." Sören let out a whimper, then he was panting again, desperately trying to fuck himself on that tongue. "Oh god, Anthony, oh god... oh god, *fuck*..."

Anthony got up, and his hard cock rubbed in the crack of Sören's ass as he kissed the back of Sören's neck, turning off the shower. They stood there for a moment, with Anthony kissing and licking Sören's neck and shoulder, before Anthony patted Sören's ass and began leading him out of the shower. Sören felt like his legs were made of jelly, head swimming with desire.

Sören found his bearings when they arrived at Anthony's bedroom, and now he was the one taking Anthony by the hand and leading him towards the bed, kissing him feverishly. Sören pushed Anthony down on the bed and Anthony gave him an amused grin as Sören climbed onto the bed and began crawling over. Sören climbed atop him, grabbed Anthony's face and kissed him deeply. Sören used the Force to open Anthony's bedtable drawer and fumbled for the lube - he felt something silky before he grasped the tube of lubricant. Sören kissed Anthony again, getting ready to straddle Anthony's hips...

...and then Anthony rolled Sören onto his back and pinned him. Anthony was the one leading the kiss now, hard cock rubbing against Sören's. As Anthony began to kiss Sören's neck, he took the lube out of Sören's hand and set it atop the bedtable. Sören let out a little whimper of protest, silenced by Anthony claiming his mouth again, kissing him roughly.

Anthony gave him another one of those smug, knowing looks that went straight to Sören's cock. "You've been wanting to take back some sense of control since everything happened," Anthony whispered. He kissed Sören's neck some more, kissed the sweet hollow of his shoulder, and then he took Sören's chin in his hand, and their eyes held. "But I think what you really need, tonight, is to lose control. To give up control, to surrender, to trust... to let someone take care of you."

He kissed Sören, tongue slow and sensual, and Sören felt him reach back over to the bedtable. Sören watched as Anthony pulled out the silky thing Sören had felt - a pair of black silk scarves. Sören gasped, cock jolting at the sight of them, knowing exactly what

they were for. Anthony kissed him again and Sören whimpered into the kiss, bucking against him, nails in Anthony's back, urgent.

Anthony grabbed Sören's arms and pushed them up. One at a time, he tied Sören's wrists to the bedposts, as Sören looked up at him with love and trust in his eyes, letting Anthony feel across their bond how much he wanted this, craved this, needed to be able to *let go* tonight after everything.

When Sören's wrists were securely tied, Anthony had him test the bonds to make sure they were neither too tight nor too loose, then he stroked Sören's face, looking into his eyes. "I love you sweetheart," Anthony husked.

Anthony spent a long time showing him just that, kissing, licking and caressing his way down Sören's body, teasing and pleasing every inch of him - nipples, stomach, hips, thighs. Making Sören writhe against the restraints, panting, howling, desperately aching for release yet never wanting Anthony to stop. Anthony knew how to explore all the sensitive places of Sören's body, sensitizing him even more, exquisite. Every now and again he paused and stroked himself a little, making Sören watch with hungry eyes, showing him this was turning him on just as much. "You're beautiful," Anthony whispered as he rubbed his nose in Sören's bush, delicately licked along the base of Sören's cock. "So fucking delicious."

"Oh god, Anthony, fuck me, *please*..."

Anthony started sucking him slowly again, mischief in his green eyes. Sören panted, whimpered, almost sobbing as the luscious torment of Anthony's mouth edged him. Anthony spread Sören's legs and lapped at Sören's opening again, until Sören let out a scream of frustrated need and begged "Anthony, please, put it in me, god, I need your cock in me so fucking bad..."

Anthony relented. He rose up, and on his knees he made his way over to Sören, straddling Sören's shoulders, his cock in Sören's face. Sören sucked him greedily, making filthy slurping noises as he sucked, wanting Anthony to know how much he wanted this. Anthony groaned, cradling Sören's head as he gently fucked Sören's mouth. "That's it," Anthony purred. He shuddered, eyes fluttering, and bit his hand with a groan - Sören could feel him losing it just a little. Anthony pulled his cock out of Sören's mouth, tapped Sören's tongue with it, letting Sören taste his precum, and then Sören watched, rapt, as Anthony poured lube over his cock and worked it in, stroking himself.

Anthony hooked a leg around Sören and pushed in. "You can't come until I say so," Anthony commanded.

Sören needed badly to come, but he needed to be dominated even more. He nodded, and let out a moan as Anthony began to thrust, slow and steady.

Anthony kept it slow at first, the two of them savoring the feel of being joined - it was Anthony's first time after being given immortality, and Sören felt reverent about it, like they were sharing something sacred. Soon enough the sacred became profane, with Anthony picking up the pace, rocking into him harder, faster, and they lost themselves in the rhythm of their fuck, the world melting away, the only thing existing was their lust, their pleasure, their need. Anthony pounded into Sören harder, and the delicious rhythm on that sweet spot sent Sören to the edge, trembling, panting, whimpering, rolling his hips to give it right back.

"Good?" Anthony gave him that smug, amused look again.

"So fucking good." Sören shuddered and let out a whining growl between clenched teeth. "Anthony, I need to come so bad..."

"I'm sure you do." Anthony reached and began to stroke Sören's cock. "But I'm the one in charge, pet. You come when I say you can come."

"Oh *god*..." Sören loved that.

With Sören's leg on his shoulder, Anthony gave Sören all he had, fucking madly. Sören loved watching him work up a sweat, taking in the sight of his sculpted body, the chest hair, the hairy thighs, the *maleness* of him, raw, primal glory. Sören howled, kept on that edge, needing to come, but needing to be fucked, needing to be owned, claimed, possessed.

"Beg for it," Anthony commanded, stroking Sören's cock, thumb rubbing the sensitive frenulum. "Beg me to let you come."

"*Please.* Oh god, Anthony, please. Fucking *please*, make me come, please, I need to come, please let me come for you..."

Anthony growled, clearly enjoying that. He licked his lips and kept fucking, stroking, teasing.

"Please. Please. *Please...*"

Sören begged and begged, until he couldn't make words anymore, just high-pitched, desperate noises. Anthony was shaking, panting, starting to get more vocal in his own pleasure, groaning, but he didn't give in right away, continuing to slam into Sören, seeing how far they could take them both.

Sören found his words again as he felt the flutters building, ready to fly past that point of no return. "Please, oh god, please, I can't hold back, Anthony, please, let me come... please, I need to come, I need to fucking *come*..." Sören let out a strangled sob.

Anthony gasped, and then he nodded and ground out, "Come for me, Sören."

Anthony's hand gripped Sören's cock harder as Sören climaxed, screaming, shooting over his chest and stomach, then spraying an arc of seed over Anthony. A few thrusts later Anthony tensed, threw back his head and cried out, and spent. Sören moaned at the feel of Anthony's seed spilling inside him, then moaned again as the seed flowed out of his contracting passage as Anthony pulled out. Anthony sank down, trembling, panting.

They kissed deeply. Anthony used the Force to untie Sören's wrists, and Sören wrapped his arms around him, flexing his sore wrists, curling his toes as the pleasure continued to throb through him. Then there was melting bliss, everything soft and warm and glowy and safe and right.

"Thank you," Sören whispered, tears of relief and intense love flowing down his cheeks, a soul-deep release.

"Thank *you.*" Anthony kissed his tears, then gave him a sweet little kiss. They rubbed noses, and Anthony rolled onto his side, pulling Sören close. "See, your brother takes care of you."

Sören sighed and snuggled into Anthony's chest, listening to his heartbeat. "I love you."

Anthony's arms tightened around him. He stroked Sören's curls, began to rock him. "I love you too, sweetheart." He kissed the top of Sören's head. "You don't have to do this alone. I'm looking out for you."

Sören closed his eyes and let himself drift. Let himself truly rest, a moment of peace.

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Sören is at the picnic again, and he once again relives watching Frankie thrown, and runs to her, trying to save her, but the Balrog whips are too fast and she burns. He looks back in anguish, seeing he's left his children unattended.

Odin is there, one eye socket hollowed out, the other eye burning, madness. He is wearing a floppy broad-brimmed hat, dark grey to match his cloak, over the ragged clothing of a wanderer. But not just any wanderer - the faded, frayed regalia of an ancient shaman-priest, who took on the gods and became one himself. Looked into the abyss, and let the abyss look into him.

Odin smiles, like the wolf prophesied to destroy him.

Now Odin picks up baby Søren and begins carrying him away from the fires. He holds Søren upside down, making the baby shriek.

"Put him down!" Sören runs to Odin and tries to grab the child away, but is flung in the air several meters, landing hard on his back. Sören gets up, wracked with pain, and rushes at Odin again. He pummels Odin with his fists and Odin just laughs at him, as the baby screams. Odin tosses the baby and catches him, throws and catches, throws and catches. Sören tries to catch the baby and keeps getting pushed back. He lunges for Odin again and Odin kicks him onto the ground, tramples him with a heavy boot.

"You have had all this time to face me," Odin says. "You have known for over two years about what I did to your parents. You have known for over two years about the prophecy. Yet you hide yourself, like a coward. I enlisted the help of an old friend to see if I could shake you out -"

"Sauron," Sören seethes. It was one thing to suspect it, another thing to have it confirmed. He is *angry*. Disgusted.

"- and still you carry on, trying to get 'back to normal'. Still hiding. Still waiting for a day when you'll be 'stronger'." Odin laughs. "Pathetic."

"Give me back my child." Sören grabs Odin's leg and pulls it off of him. He attempts to flip Odin and use the Force to pull his baby back, but Odin moves out of the way and starts dangling the baby upside down again. The way little Søren screams goes right to Sören's heart, tears in his eyes, afraid for his son.

"You will come out of hiding now. You'll face me, you'll fight me - I can finally be done with you, after waiting so long - or your son will pay for it." Odin swings the baby around, making the baby scream.

Sören tries again to grab the baby, and is shoved back. He falls off a ledge, and down,

down, down, dropped from a great height. He looks up and sees the baby dangled off the edge, shrieking. Sören screams, but can't stop falling...

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Sören woke with a screech, heart pounding, in a cold sweat.

"Sören...?" Anthony flipped on the light.

"My baby." Sören leapt out of bed, started pulling on his clothes. "My baby. Odin's going to kill my baby if I don't fight him -"

"Sören." Anthony got out of bed and went to him, making Sören pause, grabbing Sören's body and turning him so Anthony could look him in the eye. His hands on Sören's shoulders, he shook his head. "We just got back from Ceduna. You're still badly shaken by everything, understandably so -"

Sören wrenched back. "This wasn't just a nightmare, wasn't just... my trauma talking. It was him." Sören shuddered, remembering the look in Odin's eye, the predatory smile. The baby dangled over a ledge. "He's going to hurt my son if I don't face him now, ready or not." *And I'm not ready.* Sören knew there was a very good chance he wasn't going to come back. He continued to put on his clothes. He could either take the small chance that he would win, or the 100% chance that Odin would find a way to kill his son if he didn't go out there.

Anthony swallowed hard. He pinched the bridge of his nose, exhaled, and then he began to get dressed too. "I'm coming with you."

Sören felt a twinge of guilt, not wanting Anthony to sacrifice himself. "This is my fight -"

"No." Anthony shook his head. "It stopped being just your fight a long time ago. Not just because you're my partner, my family. If that dream isn't just a dream and he's threatening your son..." Anthony glared. "Threatening to harm defenseless children makes him a bully, a tyrant. Humanity doesn't need gods like him. So no, it's not just your fight."

Sören wasn't going to argue with him about it. He hoped that Anthony coming along would help rather than hurt.

Anthony gave Craig some pettings on the way out. Sören hoped at least one of them would make it back, that someone in the family would know to get Craig in the event of...

He didn't want to think about that. Sören grabbed his sword from where it rested by the door - it seemed prescient now he'd insisted on bringing it. The Silmarils pulsed, warm in his pocket. "Let's go."

Chapter 44

Sören didn't entirely know what to expect when they took the shark carving gate to the Dimmuborgir and then to Asgard, but for a moment he was *almost* impressed with the Aesir. A bridge that looked like it was made of a frozen rainbow, and moved like a moving sidewalk, took Sören and Anthony from the Asgard portal across clouds, to the top of a mountain. It was like riding on a cable car, but without being confined. For that Sören was grateful - heights were bad enough, a confined space would have shot his adrenaline up even more.

He was all nerves, but there was no going back now.

On the other side of the bridge was a mountaintop fortress, looking like it had been built of glass or clear quartz, gleaming in sunlight. As they came close Sören heard a bullhorn blowing, and before they could reach the edge of the bridge, a tall, broad figure that seemed made entirely of brilliant glowing silver-white energy came out of the portcullis, armed with a sword of light. He was the one who had been blowing the bullhorn, which swung from his belt, also made of light.

Heimdallr. Sounding the Ragnarök.

Fierce eyes like blue fire, burning in the white light, looked out at them. "You are not welcome here, *vargr*," Heimdall said, pointing his sword, his deep, booming voice ringing out as a thousand voices. "Now is your only warning to turn back, or I must -"

"Or you must *what?* Die a fool?" Sören recognized that voice - Loki - and sure enough there he was, sidling past Heimdall through the portcullis, grinning at them and laughing. Loki looked different than the last time Sören had seen him - the flood of red hair and mischievous green eyes were still the same, but otherwise Loki was clad in black leather armor and a scarlet cloak clasped with an iron knot, and had a sheathed sword strapped to a chainmail belt. Loki waved, as if the last time they'd seen each other had been friendly instead of so nasty. "Well, well. About time you dragged yourselves here."

"Get out of my way," Sören said. While he was sure Loki was somehow involved with the Balrog attack - Sören had suspicions the "former Balrog" claim wasn't former at all - he nonetheless wanted to act on good faith, some shred of honor. "My quarrel is with Odin, not with you." Even though Loki broke Frankie's heart, and his sister's - and that stung especially badly now, with Frankie gone - Sören was not here for that.

Loki gave Heimdall a would-you-get-a-load-of-this-guy look, cool and amused, while Heimdall continued to watch them, burning eyes wary. Then Loki shook his head, tsking.

"You shouldn't have given him a warning," Loki told Heimdall. "You should have killed him immediately." Loki unsheathed his sword.

Sören's hand went to his own sword, preparing to fight Loki even though he had come here for Odin, and wanted to preserve his strength and stamina. But to his shock, Loki did not draw the sword on him - but on Heimdall.

Heimdall's eyes widened, and Sören and Anthony watched as Loki and Heimdall clashed swords, dueling back and forth along the drawbridge. Just when it looked like Heimdall had delivered Loki a fatal blow, stabbing him in the gut, a second Loki appeared behind Heimdall and stabbed him in the back. The Loki with the knife in the gut disappeared in

thin air - he had been just an illusion - and as Heimdall toppled forward, the silver-white light faded and Sören saw a giant man with long blond hair, robed in blue, the blue robes quickly staining with blood. Loki pushed Heimdall's dying body off the drawbridge and Sören and Anthony watched in horror as Heimdall dropped through the clouds.

"Useless," Loki said.

Sören blinked, realizing what he'd just seen. *And there is the prophecy of Loki and Heimdall mutually killing each other... except in the case of Loki's death, it was just a trick.*

Before Sören could unsheath his sword and challenge Loki, the trickster god laughed and popped out of sight. *All yours,* came Loki's disembodied voice.

Sören turned to Anthony, who looked very uncomfortable with this whole thing. Sören was too - he felt he had no choice but to come here and bring Odin the fight he wanted, after the way Odin threatened his son, nonetheless Sören felt like they had bitten off way more than they could chew. Sören took a few deep breaths and then he took Anthony's arm and they marched together over the drawbridge, through the portcullis into the empty gatehouse... into the bailey.

There were no snipers on the battlements, or at least not as far as Sören could tell, hoping no one was concealing themselves with magic. Knowing Loki could disappear and reappear at will put him on high alert. Sören looked ahead at the keep - looking like smoky quartz where the rest of the castle was more clear - and back at Anthony. "Wait here," he said. He felt bad about leaving Anthony behind, but the fight with Odin was his alone, in the prophecy, and if Anthony stayed in the bailey he served as a guard for the drawbridge, rainbow bridge, and portal, and Sören had anxiety that someone - like Loki himself - might try to interfere with the portal.

Anthony threw his arms around Sören and kissed his cheek, holding him tight. "Good luck," he husked. When they pulled apart, Anthony's eyes were too bright, and across their bond Sören could feel his fear, not wanting to lose him.

"I love you," Sören said, looking him in the eye.

"I love you." Anthony swallowed hard.

Sören turned around and marched to the keep, not looking back, because if he looked back, he'd want to take Anthony and run away from here, and this had to be settled once and for all.

—

As Anthony watched Sören step into the keep, he fought the urge to run to Sören and start dragging him back towards the gate. He knew that running from the conflict wouldn't make it go away - it wouldn't even necessarily prolong it; Anthony now believed Sören's dream about Odin hadn't been PTSD after all, and Odin would make good on his threat to Sören's son.

But he felt even less prepared than he had when the Balrogs showed up. Before they left his flat, Anthony had put on his holster, and he was carrying a few knives with him. But even between that, and his knowledge of Krav Maga, jiu jitsu, and his ability to use the Force, Anthony felt outclassed. Loki had literally cast an illusion to make a clone of

himself; he had also vanished into thin air. And that was just one god. He and Sören were two people up against at least half a dozen beings with comparable power, if not more.

Anthony kept looking around, watching to see if anyone was coming from any direction. In his hypervigilance he also reached out with the Force to feel if anyone was approaching from behind, not wanting the rude surprise of being stabbed in the back. Everything was quiet... too quiet.

The crystalline castle on the mountaintop was a gorgeous piece of architecture - he almost wished he could show it to his mother. He had the half-mad thought of taking out his cell phone and snapping photos, including a "hey, I'm in Asgard" selfie, but he didn't know if his Earth technology would even work in a place like this. The bailey itself was also gorgeous, enough that it seemed a shame that Odin was on the wrong side of justice. He was standing on green grass studded with daisies, blue gentian and lavender scabious, and in each corner of the bailey there was a grove of oak and beech trees, blazing with the fiery colors of autumn. Along the wall to Anthony's right, there was a single tree bearing golden apples, and underneath the tree was a well. During their brief visit to the Dimmuborgir, Iceland was already seeing snow, and Anthony's spring clothes made him glad the jaunt was less than a couple of minutes long. It made the autumn of the bailey seem jarringly out of place, but Anthony remembered that Europe was in the Northern Hemisphere, and the Continent - where Wodanaz and his people had originated from - was seeing fall in October. He wondered then how Odin and the others had created Asgard, a "pocket world" or world-within-a-world. He wondered if Sören and his family could perhaps create something like it, a stronghold where they were kept safe from enemies like Sauron.

He realized the farm in Ceduna had been sort of like that, not completely, but the wards gave the property unique features like interfering with some electronic equipment. They had only extended on the immediate property, hadn't kept them from being seen and attacked outside of it, like at the seaside... but still. Anthony stroked his chin, wondering about that. He felt almost like it had been a mistake to leave Ceduna and go back to Sydney.

There was something that was bothering Anthony about all of this - pieces of the puzzle that were still missing. Anthony knew that in the prophecy of the Ragnarök, the völva had seen Fëanor and called him Fenrir. He and Sören had a conversation where Sören revealed that the Valar had given Miriel's soul to Odin, to serve as one of his Valkyries, and when she had eventually rebelled she had been reborn as mortal. But there was still *more.* Anthony wanted to know how deep the corruption ran, if it was just Odin and the Valar, or there were more agents involved.

He found himself walking towards the well. He half-expected to see Galadriel show up, though he knew that was ridiculous because she was in Aman, and this was not Aman. But just as Galadriel had used her basin to scry, now Anthony looked into the waters of the deep, dark well, like looking into a black mirror. And visions began to come to him.

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Manwë comes to Asgard, and meets with Odin, Thor, and Tyr. He explains that he is going to release Fëanor's soul from the Halls of Mandos, and that Fëanor has requested to be born among Men. The influence of the Valar, the world's eldest gods, has long since

waned in Middle-Earth. Other gods, like the Aesir, still hold power and influence in Middle-Earth, and so Manwë goes to them to enlist their help in "keeping Fëanor in his place".

Odin decides the best way to keep Fëanor down is with fear, with anxiety, with self-doubt. He thinks Fëanor's mortal form should have some sort of weakness - like asthma - and faulty brain chemistry. He devises scenarios to chip away at Fëanor's pride - abuse, bullying, rape. It falls to Tyr, the lawspeaker of the Aesir, to sign off on these events and lay them in the threads of Fëanor's fate. Tyr is reluctant to do so, thinking it is too much. But Odin tells him that unrestrained, Fëanor will kill them all.

Tyr folds his arms. *He might kill us anyway, when he finds out what we have done.*

Odin will not let it go, and at last Tyr concedes. He holds the spear in his hand and the threads of fate weave about it like the spear is a distaff. The threads become a giant sphere like a ball of lightning, and Tyr's spear pushes it out into the world, casting about an infant Sören like a net.

But even in his weakened state, the Flame Imperishable is strong, and hits back at Tyr. The spear is knocked out of Tyr's hand, and his hand is burned right off, Tyr falling to his knees, shrieking in agony, holding a blackened, smoking stump.

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Anthony's fists clenched. If the well were not made of stone, Anthony would have kicked it.

It was bad enough to know that Odin had been the engineer of so much of the tragedy and trauma in Sören's life. It was somehow even worse to know that Tyr, ostensibly a god of law and justice, could have well *prevented* it, and instead he went along with it, even if reluctantly. That made Anthony even angrier with Tyr than he was with Odin, somebody claiming to be on the side of order and what was right, and inflicting that sort of pain on someone from birth.

You lot don't deserve to be gods. You don't deserve to be alive.

He thought about defying Sören's order to wait in the bailey, storming the keep, looking for Tyr, and hunting him down. But he knew Sören had a reason for making him wait - he stood between the keep and the portal. They didn't need to get stuck in Asgard, as pretty as it was here.

There was a sound. Something coming out of the keep. Anthony reached for his holster, even though he felt a bit ridiculous about *bringing a gun to a god fight*, which seemed even worse than bringing a knife to a gun fight. He wondered if Sören was coming back, but there was a *clop* sound like boots on stone. And then a snort. It wasn't boots - there was a very large boar that looked like it was made of solid gold, standing in the entryway of the keep.

It paused for a moment to stare at him, blinking, then strode across the bailey.

Anthony's heart skipped a beat. He was still preparing to shoot - boars had tusks, he didn't want to be gored - and yet, the boar was acting in a non-threatening manner. Curious, even. The boar slowed as he came closer. "Easy," Anthony said, as much to himself as the animal. "Easy now..."

Anthony raised a hand, trying to show on his part he wasn't necessarily hostile. The boar sniffed, and Anthony found himself patting the boar's snout, the bristles tickling his palm. "Uh, good boy," Anthony said.

The boar moved his head and leaned into Anthony's touch, like he wanted pettings. Anthony started to pet the boar, who snorted approvingly, and after a few minutes of letting Anthony pet him, the boar flopped to his side like he was a cat. While Anthony still felt a bit wary, not knowing if this was a trap or not, the animal seemed innocent and Anthony gingerly squat down to pet the boar some more.

That was when another figure came out of the keep and cleared his throat. Anthony froze, and there was Tyr from his vision. Tall, dark-haired, grey-eyed - it occurred to Anthony that Tyr looked like one of the Noldor, and he wondered about that. Tyr wore a cloak of grey over somber black robes. He had a prosthetic hand of silver, and in his other hand he wielded a spear taller than he was.

Anthony rose to his feet. "You."

"I beg your pardon."

All of Anthony's rage at the vision came rushing back, and he felt something inside himself snap. "YOU! MONSTER! YOU HURT MY BROTHER!" Not thinking, just seething in fury, he ran towards Tyr, and took a flying leap, tackling the god to the ground before Tyr could strike with his spear.

—

Ali couldn't sleep in the room she had been sharing with Kenny at the mansion, so she opted to sleep on a couch in the living room until some changing around was done - Maglor was willing to trade his studio upstairs and make that Ali's bedroom, and put his studio where Ali and Kenny's room had been.

Of course, Ali was still having trouble sleeping altogether after what happened with Kenny. It didn't help that the mansion in Sydney wasn't warded the way the farm in Ceduna had been, so Ali felt vulnerable. Like it was a matter of time before they were attacked again.

She was only half-asleep when she heard something moving around in the living room. She woke right up, and saw that something was Dooku, who was getting his rapier and fumbling around for his car keys in the dark, not wanting to disturb her. "I'm up," Ali said, her voice thick from dozing off. "What's wrong?" She could sense distress.

Dooku paused, frowning. "I felt a disturbance in the Force and... I used one of the palantir to take a look." He sighed. "Sören has gone off to Asgard, presumably to face Odin."

Ali's jaw dropped. She had a feeling Sören wasn't going to wait around forever, especially when he was convinced Loki's "former Balrog" status wasn't former at all, but this soon...

"So you..." Ali licked her lips, her mouth suddenly dry. "You're going to follow him?"

"As you know, the shark carving at Tamarama is a portal. I am going to take it to the

Dimmuborgir, and from there to Asgard. Even if this fight is between he and Odin, I don't trust Sören to... not invite other trouble to himself, and I'm not sure Anthony can keep that trouble at bay, he is just one man. Two would be better."

Maglor was up now too, standing in the hall. "Sören went to face Odin?"

"Yes," Dooku said. "Someone in addition to Anthony needs to have his back."

"And then someone should have *your* back." Ali folded her arms.

"She's right," Maglor said.

"I'm going," Ali said, before Maglor could volunteer. Her mind's eye replayed the death of Kenny, the death of her father. If the Aesir were even slightly involved... they needed to pay. It wouldn't bring back the people she'd lost, but she was going to make them die for it anyway.

"I'll... watch the kids, and the animals, in that case," Maglor said.

Dooku gave a nod. "As you know, Anthony went with him. In the event that he does not return, you should probably let yourself into his flat and retrieve Craig."

"Let's make sure that doesn't need to happen." Ali's fists clenched. She got up. She was still in a camisole and pajama bottoms, but she decided she didn't need to get dressed for this - just put on a hoodie for the couple of minutes they'd be in Iceland. She did, however, put on her steel-toe boots - "ass-kicking boots", Kenny used to call them.

Maglor walked them to the door. Dooku embraced him and they kissed. Maglor stroked Dooku's cheek, his eyes sad and concerned. "Come back to me," he said. With a wry smile he added, "Make sure my idiot father and uncle come back too."

Dooku patted him. "I will do my best."

Ali hugged Maglor tight. Maglor kissed her brow. "Give them hell, Nelya," he said.

Ali smirked. "I'll give them hells, even. And I don't mean your unicorn friend -"

Maglor swatted her ass.

It was the middle of the night, and no one was around when they arrived at the shark carving, allowing Ali and Dooku to jaunt unseen. It was snowing when they reached the Dimmuborgir, and as far as Ali could tell no one was around there, either.

The rainbow bridge greeting them at the Asgard portal took Ali's breath away, and her mouth opened at the sight of the mountaintop castle, looking like it was made of crystal. Ali had a feeling it was probably stronger than glass - probably stronger than any material known to man. The rainbow bridge moved them along to a drawbridge, which was open, and Dooku and Ali looked at each other then walked through the portcullis.

In the bailey an enormous boar that looked like it was made out of solid gold was watching from the shade of an autumn-crowned oak tree, while Anthony wrestled around in the grass with a man that looked so much like one of the Noldor that it made Ali double-take. Ali saw the man's silver hand, an obvious prosthetic, and the spear lying in the grass beside them, and realized this was Tyr. She remembered Margrèt's parting words to Anthony before she took the Straight Road:

...when I was Findis, you used to follow me around a lot and I called you my puppy dog. So that makes you Garmr, Hel's dog.

It was Garmr who was prophesied to kill Tyr at the Ragnarök. A chill went through Ali, her hair standing on end. She thought about using the Force to pick up the spear and shove it through Tyr's back, but this was Anthony's fight - and now Anthony got the upper hand, rolling Tyr onto his back again.

Grab the spear, Ali yelled in the Force. *Take the fucking spear and finish him...*

Anthony had his gun out of the holster now. "Oh god," Ali muttered. Dooku pinched the bridge of his nose. Ali knew in Dooku's case his reaction was that guns were uncivilized and he preferred swords, but Ali's reaction was very different. Anthony had shot two Balrogs to death, she knew that... in Middle-Earth. Something felt otherworldly about this place, which was a given with it being Asgard, but she was reminded of something she had read a long time ago, a post-apocalyptic novel series called *Dies the Fire*, where one day technology suddenly stopped working, and guns didn't work anymore either. She thought of how technology behaved strangely on her parents' farm - television was OK, fridge and freezer and microwave worked, but watch batteries burned out, cell reception and Internet was spotty, and the drones MI6 used to try to keep an eye out there didn't survive long. She got the sense that Anthony could shoot Tyr if Tyr was in Middle-Earth, but here, not so much.

To Ali's surprise, Anthony didn't pull the trigger. He punched Tyr in the face with the gun. Dooku and Ali watched as Anthony pistol-whipped Tyr, breaking his nose and making it bleed, knocking out a couple of the god's teeth. The more pain the god was in, the less able he was to use his powers to fight back. Ali knew Anthony was capable of violence, from his time in the service, and as an MI6 agent, he knew he had been trained in Krav Maga where he could literally kill someone with his bare hands. But there was violence and then there was *ultraviolence*, and seeing Anthony completely go off and pistol-whip someone again and again, getting blood all over himself, not caring... A chill went through Ali.

"You made him suffer," Anthony snarled, "and now you're going to suffer. You're going to *hurt* for all the pain you caused him -"

Anthony punched Tyr with the pistol a few more times, and then he grabbed Tyr by the arm that had no hand, and began to punch Tyr in the face with his own prosthetic. "Bastard," Anthony growled. "Filthy fucking coward, planning that sort of fate for a helpless child -"

"Please," Tyr cried out. "I did what I had to do. Odin -"

Anthony smacked Tyr in the face again with his own hand. "You could have stood up to Odin at any time. You know it. You took the easy way out. Well, it won't be easy for you." He made Tyr's hand punch himself in the balls, before punching himself in the face again. Anthony kneed Tyr in the balls before making the hand strike once more.

"I'll give you anything you want. You and Fëanor. Money. Fame -"

Anthony spat in Tyr's face. He took out one of his knives and Ali watched as Anthony grabbed Tyr's tongue out of his mouth and cut it off, then threw it off to the side like it was a worthless piece of garbage.

"I..." Dooku blinked slowly. "Think he has it under control. I'm going to go find Sören." He took off for the keep.

Ali thought about coming with him, but she decided to wait, just in case. That boar hanging around... taking another look at the golden boar, Ali remembered the mythology. That was Freyr's boar. That meant Ingwion was probably somewhere near -

"Oh, hello there," came Ingwion's voice.

Chapter 45

Freyr was just in time to watch Anthony cut off Tyr's cock.*Remind me to never, ever, ever, ever, ever, ever, ever, ever, ever get on Anthony Hewlett-Johnson's shit list,* Ali thought to herself as Anthony flung the cock over his shoulder like it, too, was rubbish. Now Anthony yanked up the leather armor breastplate Tyr wore under his robes and disemboweled him. The sight of guts spilling onto the ground made Ali double over, dry heaving.

"Whoa there." Freyr's hands were on her, steadying her. "Are you all right?"

"What." Ali shoved him back. "Do you not remember the last time I saw you? We're not friends."

"Right. About that..." Freyr reached for his belt, a golden length of rope hung with tinkling bells, over a green robe and white tunic trimmed with golden embroidery. He was fully unglamoured, a flood of blond hair to his knees, pointy ears, eyes iridescent blue. His face was chiseled, handsome, yet still beautiful, with full lips, and the cut of his muscles was still obvious under the flow of his robes, biceps visible in his sleeves, pecs and the outline of his six-pack showing through the fabric of his tunic. He radiated warmth and a golden glow. He was one of the most gorgeous men Ali had ever seen - and Ali still hadn't forgotten or forgiven the falling out back in May.

Hanging from a loop on his belt was an antler. "I come in peace."

"Oh, do you now." Ali didn't believe that.

"Come, let us reason together." Freyr took her by the hand - Ali recoiled at his touch - and he led her under one of the groves of oak and beech trees, to Ali's left, just before the keep. They sat down under the trees, on a large grey stone.

"You're not going after him," Ali observed as Anthony picked himself up, brushed himself off - and then proceeded to vomit in the grass, at the sight of the carnage he'd produced.

"No," Freyr said.

"That was one of your own people he killed," Ali said. She pursed her lips. She didn't trust this at all, but she was waiting before she acted; whatever Freyr said or did next might be useful, at least.

"I have been waiting for this day for a long time," Freyr said. "When I gave my blood to Sören to make him immortal, and take away one of his inherent disadvantages in this fight, that was sincere. I had hopes that eventually he'd reclaim at least some of his power as the Flame Imperishable and bestow immortality on others in his family. Unfortunately, it was too late for some of them."

Ali glared. "So you've wanted Tyr and Odin dead all this time? And you've been waiting for someone else to do your dirty work?"

"I have been waiting for reinforcement," Freyr said. "And worthy allies."

"Allies."

Freyr rose. He drew a rune in the air with his antler, which glowed golden, and suddenly a series of visions came to Ali's mind's eye. Pagans around the world re-discovering the old gods, making offerings, prayers, giving them energy, giving them power. The gods growing in power and strength and influence. Ruling over humans, over nature.

A place for everything, and everything in its place.

"Odin misuses this power," Freyr said. "He stirs up hatred, and strife..." The vision showed groups of white nationalists calling themselves followers of Odin, bearing the swastika, flying the Confederate flag... one man in a Viking helmet bearing a tattoo of Odin's symbol, the valknut, marching with a group of rioters. "Odin thinks that humanity is out of alignment with nature, and that something like war will bring the population back to a manageable size, one that lives more lightly on the planet... and turns to the gods to prevent another cataclysm."

"And what? With him out of the way, you're just... going to take over?"

"And bring not war, but peace." Freyr nodded. "Humans need to be cared for." The vision showed Freyr answering prayers. "He has lost sight of that. I do not want that blood on my hands. Your family... you have been abused by gods. You know not to make the same mistakes. You would show compassion on mortals. It would be an honor for us to rule together."

Ali sat, and pondered. She thought about the attitude that humans needed to be taken care of, like they were children or pets who couldn't fend for themselves, and found herself bristling. She thought about the way the Australian government had looked at Aboriginals as "backwards" and not able to "properly" care for themselves compared to white Australians, because their ways were different. She thought about the Stolen Generations, where children of her mother's generation were forcibly taken from their home and "resocialized" to integrate into Australian society, by people in power who thought they knew better, whose attempts at "compassion", at trying to "do right" did more harm than good.

And Ali hadn't forgotten about Freyr's comments back in May, the idea that she would be more "glorious" if she returned to an Eldar body with white skin. He was just another colonizer, when it came down to it, all of humanity was his empire. The same "have to intervene for their own good" caretaking that people really didn't *need*.

It might seem cruel to leave humans to their own fates and not do something if they were asking for help, but Ali thought it was even more cruel to help in such a paternalistic way. Humans seeing their "betters" caring for them reinforced the idea that some groups needed "intervention" by those who "knew best".

Now she was *angry.*

"Power is meant to be used," Freyr said, sensing her tension.

"Yeh... you're talking to the wrong person about power, mate." Ali stood up. "You'll take over for Odin and then what? *You'll still rule.* You'll still treat humans like backwards little creatures that need you to do everything for them, whether or not what you're doing helps or hurts in the long run. It's the same fucked-up system. Meet the new boss, same as the old boss." She shook her head. "The world has had enough of people like you."

Freyr opened his mouth and before he could say anything in response, Ali took a deep breath. Freyr's antler became a lightning rod, as Ali channeled all of her rage and it

sparked out into bolts of blue, crackling. Freyr flashed blue, and then Ali saw his hair on fire, his skin crisped. He fell over, and Ali shocked him again, and again, just to make sure he was *really* gone.

Now the oak and beech trees where they'd been sitting were burning, and the grass was going up in flames as well. Ali looked out at Anthony, who had been watching the entire exchange, and his jaw dropped, and Ali got the sense he was just as horrified by Ali's lightning as Ali had been of Anthony's violent slaughter of Tyr. Horrified... and strangely proud.

Anthony gave a non-ironic slow clap. "Well done, good show."

The boar was making noises of distress now, both at his fallen master and the fire, which was spreading to the entire bailey. "Right," Ali said. The boar was probably harmless, and Ali and Anthony led the boar into the keep. It occurred to Ali that if the entire bailey went up in flames it was going to be harder to get to the portal, but maybe there was another way there, or some source of water in the castle that could be used to douse the flames. Right now, they were safer in the keep, even with the unknown inside.

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The keep reminded Sören of a TARDIS - bigger on the inside - although he didn't know if that perception was true, or if it just felt bigger because it was so *empty*. He had been down multiple corridors looking for Odin, peered into rooms that were more like suites, obviously lived-in by different Aesir but with no sign of life.

Reaching out with the Force, Sören could feel presences underneath him, like there was a stairwell or lift he hadn't found yet and the residents had heard Heimdall's horn and fled to the underground for safety. That made a certain kind of sense, but he wasn't ready to go down there to find Odin, for fear of falling into an ambush or another kind of trap.

Sören saw light, and he followed it down the corridor. That light turned out to be sunlight - an open portcullis. It wasn't out to the bailey again, but to what appeared to be a back section. The other edge of the mountaintop, with clouds, no rainbow bridge.

In the grass there was a very tall chair, almost as tall as the towers of the castle, which looked like it had been made of obsidian or black glass, inlaid with runes up the sides in gold. Odin was sitting on that chair, meditating. Sören remembered Freyr and Loki telling him of Hliðskjálf, Odin's high seat, which Odin used to see into all worlds - Freyr and Loki had used this seat as well, which is how they knew there was another reality where Fëanor and his kin had thrown down the Valar. Sören wondered how it was made. Something felt vaguely familiar about the chair, and not just because Freyr and Loki had told him about it.

Odin opened his eye and smiled at Sören. Sören's heart skipped a beat. *Oh shit.* There was no going back now, not that Sören would have gone back in the first place, taking the threat on his son seriously. Sören was so caught up in looking at the chair that he hadn't noticed the direwolves, one sitting on either side of the bottom of the chair. They growled at him. Sören instinctively took a step back before he realized what he was doing and stood his ground, his hand on his sword.

Sören felt like an idiot, dressed in a black T-shirt, blue jeans, and a pair of Doc Martens, dressed like an average guy, here to take on a god who had killed both his parents. He

knew it would befit the wolf prophecy more if he was wearing a ton of furs, like some ancient Viking chieftain reanimated. But it was what it was. He was here. It was time to get this done.

Odin jumped down from the high seat and landed on his feet in front of Sören.

Sören didn't even give him a chance to say or do anything. He raised his sword and swung. Amazingly, his sword met cold steel - in the blink of an eye Odin had readied his own sword.

Oh SHIT.

Odin swung back. Sören dodged, and lunged again. Odin's sword parried, and sword pushed against sword before Odin slipped his out of the cross and thrust, aiming for Sören's stomach. Sören dodged, and just before Odin could pull his blade back Sören's sword came down. He pushed Odin's sword back and Odin had to move out of the way of his own sword.

It was time to take a page out of Dooku's playbook. Sören moved his sword in one direction, and as Odin moved to block, at the very last second Sören quickly moved his sword in the opposite direction, almost scoring a hit - Odin moved out of the way just in time. Odin responded to that by trying to pull on Sören's sword with telekinesis. Sören felt the tug, and thought fast. He had used pyrokinesis before, kindling a fire in Canada in winter. His sword wasn't a campfire, but he still visualized his intended effect, stirring the Flame Imperishable within himself, and a few seconds later his sword conjured fire. Odin stopped tugging on the sword with his mind. Sören made another feint, hoping to touch even the edge of Odin's garment and set it on fire, which he could quickly kindle to set Odin on fire too. But then Odin responded with his own magic - the fire went out, turned to frost. The sword in Sören's hands was so cold it *burned*, and Sören dropped it. The minute it hit the ground, Odin laughed, and Sören watched helplessly as Odin used telekinesis to pick up Sören's sword from the ground, and throw it off the mountaintop, into the clouds.

Sören's jaw dropped. He started to back up again, not thinking about it. Odin came closer, swinging. Sören ducked, and dodged as Odin swung again.

Then Odin dropped his own sword and just laughed at him. "I thought you would have more fight in you, *vargr*."

"Fuck you," Sören seethed, and clenched his fist, attempting a Force choke.

Odin blocked it, and used telekinesis to shove Sören down on his back, on the ground. Then Sören was held immobile, paralyzed, and Odin came closer, looming over him. Odin waved his hand and Sören screamed as pain like a thousand stinging fire ants swarmed over his body. Odin did it again, and again. Sören gasped for breath, tears in his eyes. He realized Odin could do this to him indefinitely - and worse. Sören tried to get a hold of himself, tried to push back with his mind to break the lock Odin had on his body. As hard as he pushed, he still stayed frozen, and another round of stinging, burning pricks moved over his flesh.

"Surrender," Odin said, "and I will let you die in peace."

Sören sneered. "Piss off."

Odin chuckled. "You are a fool. You cannot win."

Sören was almost inclined to agree - of course he was a fool to challenge a god, who could torture him like this. But he had gotten this far. There had to be *something* he could do. Sören racked his brain, searching for a way out. He remembered how his Force hold on the Balrogs had been broken when his concentration was disrupted, during the attack several days ago.

"Why?" Sören asked.

Odin gave him a confused look, as if he hadn't expected Sören to reply with a question. "What do you mean, why? Why you are a fool? Why you won't win against me -"

"No, why are you doing this? Any of this? Don't tell me it's the prophecy - how did you know that prophecy was about *me*?" Sören scowled. "Wouldn't it just have been easier to avoid making me your enemy by making me your friend?"

Odin smiled - an unpleasant, predatory smile. "You see... in the old world, when I used to be human, thousands of years ago, we heard tales about you. Most of those tales are gone now, but one of them survives, adapted by the Greeks, distorted over time into a story with very little resemblance to what happened... you might have heard of it, Prometheus stealing fire from the gods, and being chained for eternity."

I didn't steal anything. The gods stole from ME. Sören was angry enough to try to push back again, but he made himself wait, not wanting Odin to figure out what he was doing.

Odin went on. "You were the world's very first anti-theist. You declared the Valar evil, and rose up against them. I admired you. In the days when the world was still full of fantastic creatures, I fought the frost giants and won. Then I fought the local gods who had let them run wild and bring so much sorrow, as I thought it was their responsibility. I didn't stop there. I took on more and more gods. I absorbed their power."

"But not the Valar."

"No. They were the first gods of this world, the eldest. Their influence in this world is not what it was, but they are the root from which all gods spring, and I knew to cut them off would be a very bad thing. But I still thought it useful to make them think I would spare them, if they gave me tribute. And they did. They gave me your mother."

Sören wanted to spit. He made himself keep holding back, waiting for the right moment.

"The difference between you and I, *vargr*, is that you thought people don't need gods, that it makes them thralls. I see how this world has fared in the age of reason, when so many have declared 'god is dead'. There is lawlessness like never before. And now humans are killing the planet. In your own country of Iceland, the glaciers are melting. They had a funeral for one of them, you know."

"I know."

"Humans need to be put back in their place. There needs to be a culling, to bring the population down. The war, the famines - that will make them think twice about what they have done. They will turn back to the gods. The seeds are already being planted, with people rediscovering the gods they have forgotten."

"Like all the racist assholes in the States and the UK who follow you?" Sören had heard about that; it was an embarrassment to the Pagans in liberal, tolerant Iceland, he'd known

a few when he lived there who'd remarked on it.

"They are idiots," Odin said. "I traveled far and wide for wisdom, they are fools to forget that and be so closed-minded. But they are nonetheless useful idiots. Pawns in this game, instruments of war." Odin narrowed his eyes.

"So you think you just... have the right... to try to bring about the extermination of millions of people, and that traumatizing the survivors is going to change things for the better. You sow hatred in people's minds. As opposed to... you know. Giving people inspiration to invent green technologies, and things like that." Sören was absolutely disgusted.

Odin didn't have anything to say to that, and Sören found that very telling. Sören continued, "You know what I think? Back in the day, you used to take human sacrifices... like the nine nines at Uppsala. You feed on the death. It gives you power. You don't give a *damn* about actually saving the planet, you want to feed on all that death energy, and the fear of the survivors -"

"Starting with *your death.* You will not stand in my way,*vargr.*"

"You've already gotten in your own way. A big, bad god going up against a human just tells me how scared and pathetic you really fucking are -"

"SHUT UP!"

Sören pushed back against the lock on him as hard as he could. Odin toppled forward and Sören scrambled to his feet. He still felt weak, after the stinging attacks, but he steadied himself, focusing. Now Sören used the Force to pick up Odin's sword from the ground. Odin waved his hand and Sören was flung in the air, landing on the ground with a hard thud that would have broken bones if he was still mortal. Odin raised his hand and Sören felt the power building, and pushed back against the next wave of energy, before it could entrap him.

"Pathetic," Sören repeated. "Already you're struggling to keep up -"

Odin growled and attempted to lock onto Sören again. Sören pushed back, even more exhausted when the energy dissipated; he wasn't going to be able to do that for much longer.

A shadow fell over them. Odin paused, and turned around. Sören looked up. In the sky, floating above the clouds, was a giant ship. A ship that looked like it could sail on the sea, but was instead sailing in the sky through magic.

It was a swan ship. Loki was at the helm - that was apparently where he'd disappeared to - and the deck was full of passengers who looked undead. Giving it a second, closer look, Sören realized it was undead Noldor.

Loki was laughing maniacally as the ship came closer; soon it would sail over the edge of the mountain and into the green where Odin and Sören were battling.

"It's time to pay for your crimes," Loki called out in a singsong voice.

Sören wasn't sure if Loki was addressing Odin... or him, considering who the dead passengers were. He realized then it didn't matter. If Loki had been honest with them that he was working behind Odin's back... he'd still betrayed an oath, even one made under duress. After the way Loki had abandoned his sister and Frankie, Loki proved his only

loyalty was to himself. Sören knew that even if this were a trap to "save the day" by getting rid of Odin... he could never trust Loki. He would be spending the rest of his life looking over his shoulder, waiting for whenever Loki decided to stab him in the back for his own self-interests.

Sören didn't hesitate. He conjured fire, and threw the fireball at Loki's swan ship of the dead. It went up immediately, Loki shrieking as his hair set on fire, then he was on fire, clothes burning before all of him was consumed. The undead also went up in flames, and the ship began to break apart, falling through the clouds in a storm of fire and ash.

Odin's jaw dropped as he looked from the flaming wreckage, to Sören. "You saved my life," Odin said.

"No," Sören said. "You don't have a life."

Conjuring the fire seemed to feed Sören's strength. He remembered the way he'd used the Force to shatter the knives, explode the coffee cans. Now he built momentum, pushing out pressure. Sören felt like he, too, was going to shatter as the pressure built, and with it gravity seemed to climb higher and higher, making him feel like he was made of lead, the weight crushing. Odin made a terrible rattling noise just before he *broke*, blood bursting, flesh and bone spraying everywhere, a terrible corrupted dark energy that also stank like rotten meat rising in plumes from the bits of the god's remains.

Sören let out a deep sigh, relief flooding him both at the sight of Odin's shattered body, and the release of the pressure. He felt about ready to pass out.

Just before he could close his eyes, he sensed he wasn't alone. The direwolves were still at the bottom of the high seat, blinking as if they'd come out of a stupor - Sören wondered if Odin had put some kind of spell on them to make them his friends. Sören looked over and he saw people coming out of the portcullis with bags, like they were evacuating, and sure enough, more ships floated up out of the clouds.

One of the people coming out of the castle stopped and took a look at the chunks of flesh and bone littering the ground, and Sören himself - Sören looked down and saw he'd gotten blood on himself and a couple pieces of Odin, including Odin's eyeball. Sören held it out to taunt the man looking at him. "Can eye be of service?"

The man drew his sword and stormed over to him. "YOU KILLED MY FATHER!" the man screamed.

Sören realized this was Viðarr, one of Odin's sons, silent no more, set to avenge the slaying. Before the prophecy could come true, Sören clenched his fist and attempted to Force choke Viðarr, but the man had some kind of deflection spell and Sören found himself Force choked, panicking as he couldn't breathe. Viðarr took Odin's sword from Sören and with a sword in each hand, he put one sword to Sören's neck and the other to Sören's gut.

Just before he could stab, Sören watched as Dooku stepped behind the man - Dooku had moved with the crowd coming out of the castle to conceal himself - and Dooku's rapier cut the head off Viðarr's shoulders, Viðarr dropping his swords as his body fell. The head bounced before it it the ground, and Dooku kicked it off the mountaintop with a look of distaste.

Sören could breathe again. "I owe you one," he gasped.

Dooku gave a small bow.

Sören and Dooku looked back at what was left of the Aesir - Sören was surprised more of them weren't trying to fight, they were just heading to the sky ships to get out of there. Sören thought about letting them go, but he worried that wherever they went, they might try to avenge Odin just as Viðarr did, and Sören didn't want to live in fear of retaliation, having to go through this all over again. He had enough enemies.

Sören addressed them. "I have killed your king. You can swear fealty to me, or you can die like he did."

Most of the Aesir kept on to board the ships, not even acknowledging him, but three of them stopped - a man even more beautiful than Freyr had been, with golden hair, clad in white, and two men who looked like younger, shorter versions of Thor, one stocky and one skinny.

"My father was a madman," the blond man said. He knelt. "I, Baldur, swear my fealty."

The two mini-Thors knelt also. "I, Magni, swear it." "I, Modi, swear troth."

Sören regarded them warily, but could not sense deceit. He felt deep sorrow coming from Baldur, regret, not for Odin's death, but for what Odin had been in life. *It might be too late to undo the damage done,* Baldur thought.

The remaining Aesir were on the sky ships. No further pledges of fealty. Sören knew what he had to do. Just as the ships began to sail on the clouds, Sören conjured a fireball in each hand, and flung them at the ships. The ships began to burn, screams echoing across the sky. Dooku put a hand on Sören's shoulder and squeezed; there was no condemnation. That little gesture of acceptance from Fingolfin meant *so much.*

Though Sören welcomed not being judged by Fingolfin for it, Sören didn't like it... but he liked even less the prospect of revenge against him, or others in his family, or his children. He still felt like a monster, a remorse there that had not been present when Fëanor burned the ships at Losgar ages ago, gone mad when he had lost so much.

Sören turned to Baldur. "Was this the last of your people? Are there any more?"

"Yes and no," Baldur said.

Sören didn't understand. Baldur made a "come along" gesture, leading the way; Sören and Dooku followed, though Sören still felt cautious, wanting to act in good faith but nonetheless prepared for a trap. Baldur walked them towards Odin's high seat, and the direwolves rose to their feet but otherwise did not approach. As they came to the base of the high seat, Baldur waved his hand and the bottom of the high seat became a door, opening.

They stepped through to a huge field, and in the back of the field was a large hall built of wooden beams, reminiscent of ancient Viking feasting halls. All along the field were warriors in armor, bearing swords and shields, fighting each other. Baldur called out, "Einherjar!"

The warriors stopped fighting and stood at attention. Baldur brought Sören forward. "My father is dead," Baldur said. "This is who killed him. He has conquered, and you serve him now."

All the warriors went down on one knee. Sören waved his hand dismissively. "I will give you what Odin never gave you - a choice." He knew what this place was - Valhalla. Where his father, Sigurð, had been a warrior, fighting for however many hundreds if not thousands of years, before he rebelled and was reborn as mortal, just to be killed by Odin. "I have a war to fight, and I need an army." Sören thought of the Valar - even if their influence in the world had waned, they were still powerful in their own realm... the most powerful, the primordial gods. "If you would stand with me when the day comes, I would welcome your service. But if you are tired of fighting... if it has been too long... I will let you go. You may be reborn among humans, and see the world once more. The choice is yours."

Sören didn't want to kill anyone, though he knew it would be mercy killing if that was what they chose. Baldur met his eyes. *I will do it,* Baldur spoke into his mind. *I will give them the light of peace if that is what they want.*

The warriors seemed confused - Sören knew they had been here in Valhalla for so long, fighting each other and dying every day at Odin's command, that they'd forgotten any other way to live. A few warriors came forward to ask for the gift of death, but just a few.

And one of the warriors who came forward was a familiar face. Sören gasped when he saw who it was - his uncle Böðvar, who had died a warrior's death facing Balrogs.

They embraced. Sören tried not to cry.

"Do you... are you asking to..." Sören didn't want to see him die all over again.

"I'm not asking for death," Böðvar said. "Sure, I hated the way the old man ran this place... but now that he's gone, it ain't so bad. I take care of a horse." He gestured and farther out in the field was an eight-legged grey horse, munching hay. *Sleipnir.* Sören knew the myth was real - Loki had mentioned it off-handedly - but there was the horse in the flesh. Böðvar turned back to Sören with a smile. "If you need an army... I'd be happy to help get them ready for that fight against the Valar."

"Thank you," Sören said.

They embraced again. Sören let himself cry a little. Böðvar tousled Sören's hair. "You did good, kid," he said.

Sören looked around for his father, but once Baldur was done sending the warriors who had requested death off into sleep, Baldur led them back out of the door. As they were coming out of the bottom of the high seat, Anthony and Ali were coming out of the castle, accompanied by Freyr's golden boar, Gullinbursti.

"The bailey's on fire," Ali said. "I don't know how we're going to safely get back to the portal -"

"We'll take care of it," Magni said, and Modi nodded. They ran into the castle and a moment later, Sören heard thunder.

Sören wondered what had become of Thor, who was conspicuously absent from this whole ordeal. Before he could linger on that thought too long, Anthony squeezed him, weeping with relief. Sören cried too, the dam breaking, no longer able to hold back the tears.

"We have some orphaned animals here," Ali said, looking at Gullinbursti, then the

direwolves. She looked at Baldur.

"You're welcome to take the boar if you would like him," Baldur said. "I am... not staying here. Too many memories. Too much... pain." He frowned.

"Are you taking the wolves where you go?" Sören asked, hoping the answer was yes. Having a gigantic immortal boar was going to be enough to take care of, never mind two direwolves.

"I don't like abandoning them, but Geri and Freki would remind me too much of my father."

Sören looked at Hliðskjálf. "If you and Thor's sons are abandoning Asgard, we should destroy that thing first, so it doesn't get used by the wrong people." *Like Sauron.* Then he looked at Geri and Freki, and thought of Böðvar. Celegorm. *At least I know someone who would probably like a couple of wolves.* "But first..."

Sören went back in through the door at the bottom of the high seat, this time bringing Ali with him, and the two wolves. Geri and Freki ran right to Böðvar like they already knew him, and Ali stopped in her tracks, eyes wide. Then she, too, ran to her father, chasing after the wolves. Sören watched as Ali and Böðvar hugged and cried, reunited for a little while.

Baldur lingered in the distance. Sören let his cousin and uncle have a few minutes to themselves and went over to Baldur. "Before I break the high seat," Sören asked, "it's not going to... destroy Valhalla, is it?"

"No. The door is just a way to get in, it's not technically inside the high seat."

"And is there another way to get in here?"

"There is," Baldur said, nodding. He began walking towards the feast hall, and then around it to the other side. Sören saw a marble platform with three stone steps ascending. Baldur climbed the steps, and so did Sören, and when they stepped into the center of the platform there was a jump - like a milder version of using the portals - and then Sören found himself standing in the back green of the castle on a stone slab he hadn't noticed in the heat of battle, a few feet from where Anthony and Dooku were waiting with Gullinbursti.

Once Ali had rejoined them, Dooku and Anthony took Sören's hands, lending their power to his. Sören pushed, and the high seat shattered, splintering into many glittering shards of black crystal. Most of the shards dissolved before they hit the ground - Sören caught one and it did not dissolve. Sören tucked it into his pocket; this could be useful for something later.

"Let's go home," Sören said. "I've had enough adventure for awhile."

Of course it wasn't over - the Valar were still out there. And Sauron. And whatever other gods or supernatural entities had heard of Fëanor's reputation and saw him as a threat. But Sören would deal with them eventually. Right now, he just wanted a hot bath, to scrub Odin's filth off his skin.

Chapter 46

After returning from Asgard, Anthony didn't want to be alone in his flat, and nobody had an objection to him bringing Craig and staying for awhile.

"Or you know, you might as well just move in," Sören said.

Anthony would have been overjoyed by that, if he weren't so drained from what happened in Asgard... and it hadn't been very long since the Balrog attack, either.

Indeed, the next few days passed in a blur, as everyone caught up on sleep, Sören especially - just seeing Sören smash Odin's high seat with the Force was an impressive feat; Anthony couldn't even imagine what it had been like to rip Odin apart, or set sky ships on fire.

But Sören didn't just need sleep, he needed comfort. They all did. Anthony and Sören took time to hold each other and cry together, grateful to be alive after everything... but also getting hit by the mind-breaking reality of what they'd done, what they'd had to do to survive... what was waiting for them down the road.

Sometimes Anthony found Sören and Dooku stealing private moments, cuddling. Sometimes it was Maglor who held Sören close. And sometimes, Anthony found himself being hugged by Dooku, hugged by Maglor. They were his family, too, welcoming him home.

Anthony had been staying with them for a week when Sören called a family meeting. Just before the family meeting Anthony saw Ali outside on her cell phone, and only half-listened in, not getting much beyond Ali saying "uh huh, yeh, that sounds good." Most of Anthony's attention was on the giant golden boar, who was sleeping out in the yard. Their property was fenced, and a few minutes' walk from their nearest neighbor, so no one could easily spy and see they had somehow acquired a huge boar that looked like it was made of gold. But the boar was loud enough with grunting and snorting and squealing that Anthony had concerns that was eventually going to attract attention from the neighborhood, and that was the opposite of the family keeping a low profile in Sydney.

When Ali got off the phone, Sören called the family meeting to order, and as it turned out, it had to do with remaining in Sydney.

"I've been thinking," Sören said, "as much as I hate to impose on Darren and Aunt Medika after what happened... I think we should ask them if we can stay in Ceduna. It would be better if we're keeping Gullinbursti, he'll have more room, the noise will be less of an issue... but it's not just that. The place is warded, and I feel safer there. It's better to have family closer, what's left of it. Strength in numbers. I don't just mean to fight, though that too. I mean..." Sören put a hand on his heart. "We've all been through a lot, and we need time to heal."

"I agree," Ali said. "And actually, that was who I was talking to just before the meeting started. Darren and Mum have invited us to come back and stay with them. So if no one objects..."

"I don't," Dooku said. "I rather miss living in a small, rural place like Svalbarðseyri. It seems we could all use some peace and quiet."

"And a change of location in general," Maglor said. "Someplace that doesn't feel haunted the way this house does now."

Anthony nodded. "I'll have to tell MI6, but they were more concerned that you stay put in Australia for a bit. Other than that... I don't see why it would be a problem to move within Australia." But then he remembered that Sören had come back without his sword, and though he otherwise had no objection, he still had to say, "Sören... your forge."

"I can build another forge." Sören shrugged. "I can't build another family."

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That night, they began to pack. It would still be a few more days yet before they'd leave for Ceduna, but Sören wanted to get moving as soon as possible. And Anthony knew that packing was also a distraction - Sören still wasn't really OK since the battle in Asgard, not that Anthony could blame him.

There was of course only so much packing they could do in one evening, and when they began to wind down, with Sören and Anthony curled up on each other in the guest room watching TV, Sören fell apart.

Anthony rocked him, pet him, kissed his tears. "Sweetheart," he said, feeling tears sting his own eyes at the sight of Sören crying, feeling his distress across their bond. How much everything had radically changed in such a short period of time, even more of a shakeup than when Dag had been taken, and Sören was wondering if they ever *would* get a chance to rest and recover. "It's OK, sweetheart." It wasn't, and they both knew that - it was like a parent telling a frightened child there were no monsters under the bed when there were real monsters out in the world. But it was all Anthony could do... the assurance that at least for *right now*, they had each other, they were safe.

Sören sobbed harder. "I'm sorry," he choked out. "I know I'm a baby -"

Anthony took Sören's chin in his hand and attempted humor. "Well, you used to be the oldest. It's your turn to be the baby, and my turn to take care of you." Then Anthony booped Sören's nose. "It's fine to cry. You need to let it out. It's been a lot, I know. Too much, really."

"I feel like all I ever fucking do is cry." Sören sniffled. "I feel like all I ever fucking do is *hurt.*"

Anthony's arms tightened around him. "You have been hurt, Sören. Badly. It's not the sort of hurt one can just get over." Anthony thought of the Gulf, the way it still haunted his nightmares. *The good old days when I just thought other humans were the problem, no gods pulling the strings.*

"I killed at least two gods and I still feel so fucking *powerless.*" Sören let out another torrent of tears. "We might not be so lucky the next time, you know?"

"Next time is... a long ways away. Hopefully." Anthony stroked Sören's cheek. "In the meantime... you're here. And I'm here."

"And I'm here," Dooku said from the doorway.

Anthony and Sören turned to look at him. Dooku cleared his throat and stepped in. "My apologies for eavesdropping," Dooku said, "but I sensed distress, and -"

"It's fine," Anthony said.

Maglor peeked his head in and Dooku dragged him inside. Dooku and Maglor came over to sit on the edge of the bed. Now they were holding Sören too, and after a minute Dooku and Maglor each put an arm around Anthony as well. They all held each other, rocking together, soothing.

Dooku kissed Sören's tears, and at last, his mouth. A sweet, gentle kiss deepened, heated. Anthony heard himself moan as he watched Dooku and Sören kiss, tongues playing together, the sensuality smoldering between them. Sören's hands slid down Dooku's chest, and back up, and Dooku pulled back to take off his pajama top, exposing a trim, muscular torso with a lush silver pelt. "Is this what you want, sweetheart?" Dooku asked, guiding Sören's hands to his bare chest.

"Yes, Daddy," Sören said, and leaned in, rubbing his nose in the fur. They kissed again, and Anthony bit his lip, cock stiffening - they looked so delicious together.

Maglor tapped Anthony. "I think I know how we can cheer up Sören," Maglor said with a wicked little smirk on his face.

With that, Maglor pulled Anthony against him and kissed him hard. Anthony could barely believe it. He was attracted to both Dooku and Maglor, but they'd all been holding back this long, it never seemed the right time. Now, the time was here. Anthony kissed Maglor back, hungry. He heard Sören's breath hitch, and Sören gasped, "That is *so fucking hot.*"

"Indeed," Dooku said. When Anthony and Maglor pulled back, catching their breath, Dooku added, "So is this."

Dooku leaned in and kissed Anthony. Anthony groaned into the kiss, his hands trembling as he got to feel that silver pelt for himself. They kissed again, and then Sören came in for a kiss, Sören's hand palming the hard bulge in Anthony's pajama bottoms. Anthony brushed a pierced nipple through the fabric of Sören's T-shirt, and that brought out the beast in Sören, tugging at Anthony's shirt to pull it off, then yanking his pajama bottoms down. Anthony laughed at Sören's vehemence, and stopped laughing when Sören got up from the bed and shucked his own clothing, already fully erect. Anthony sighed at the sight of Sören naked, magnificent.

"Tonight, let's burn together," Sören said, looking at each of his lovers in turn. "Tonight... let's live."

Dooku and Maglor quickly got their clothes off, and the four of them fell on each other, the ancient passion rediscovered as they took turns kissing, caressing. Sören made the best noises as Dooku and Anthony sucked his nipples at the same time, moaning into Maglor's kisses, moaning louder as Maglor kissed his way down, and began sucking at Sören's cock, greedy for it. Soon Dooku led Anthony back to kiss him, and they watched as Sören and Maglor got into a sixty-nine, sucking each other, a moment later following suit. Anthony enjoyed having his mouth full of Dooku's cock, and feeling Dooku's talented mouth sucking, teasing. It was even better when Sören let Maglor's cock slip from his mouth to take a look at them, let out a little whimper, and started sucking Maglor even harder, really getting into it.

Anthony was so turned on by the debauchery of sucking and being sucked by Dooku

while Sören and Maglor were viciously devouring each other next to him, that Anthony got to that edge right away, feeling dangerously close to orgasm. Dooku sensed it and sucked more slowly, then took Anthony's cock out of his mouth and just licked it. Dooku pulled Sören's curls and Sören let go of Maglor's cock again so they could kiss, Dooku sharing Anthony's precum with Sören.

Sören took a few licks himself, while Maglor watched, and then Sören kissed Maglor to let Maglor have a taste of Anthony as well. That was when they changed position - now Maglor and Anthony were sucking each other, while Sören and Dooku sucked each other. Sören got more vocal, and so did Dooku - hearing Sören's muffled cries and Dooku's deeper grunts made Anthony start to lose it again. Maglor loved to tease just as much as Dooku if not more, lapping at Anthony's cock, bathing it, then his tongue glided in slow, deliberate strokes.

Sören and Anthony sucked each other next, and Sören was just as worked up as he was, precum flowing. Anthony couldn't resist playing with Sören's ass, fingering it, and when Sören started fucking himself on Anthony's fingers, Anthony growled around the cock in his mouth, aching to be inside him. He moved his head and began to tongue Sören's opening, knowing how to make him crazy, licking slow, then faster, then slow again. Sören rocked his hips, thrusting against Anthony's tongue as he sucked harder, faster, driving Anthony wild too, intensifying that urge to fuck. Before he could come in Sören's mouth he pulled out. Sören grabbed Maglor away from Dooku's cock to kiss him.

Maglor lay on his back, a pillow under his hips, legs spread, and Sören and Anthony watched as Dooku got on his knees between Maglor's legs and took him. The sight of Dooku pushing inside Maglor was so erotic Anthony almost came from that alone, his lust burning hotter as Sören kissed him, reached down to play with his cock. They watched Dooku take his first few thrusts, cock gliding in and out, and Sören moaned. Sören climbed on top of Maglor, sucking Maglor's cock, and Maglor grabbed Sören's hips and began sucking him eagerly. Anthony got in position behind Sören, poured lube into Sören's passage and over his own cock, and settled his hands over Maglor's on Sören's hips as he guided the tip of his cock to the opening. "Mmmhmmm, *mmmhmmm*," Sören encouraged, his mouth full of cock, thrusting his hips back at Anthony. Anthony groaned as he slid into Sören, and again when he was all the way inside. Sören moaned around the cock in his mouth. Anthony began to thrust, slowly. Watching Dooku thrust into Maglor - looking at Dooku's body, the look of lust in his dark eyes - added to his pleasure, as did Sören sucking Maglor harder, moaning and whimpering.

Anthony reached out to run his hands over Dooku's body, and Dooku grabbed Sören's curls. Anthony and Dooku matched each other's rhythms, and Sören and Maglor sucked more hungrily, until they were rocking their hips back at their lovers, fucking each other's mouths. Anthony felt himself on that edge again, so turned on by everything, so lost in sensation, but he held back, not just because he wanted Sören to come before he did, but he didn't want to stop, this moment of magic, this moment when nothing else mattered but their hunger, their want for each other, no longer denied.

Maglor came first, crying out around the cock in his mouth. With seed spilling from the corners of his mouth Sören let out a fierce shout, and the feel of Sören contracting set Anthony off, gasping as the pleasure overtook him. Dooku groaned, and before Anthony could collapse Dooku caught him, and pulled him into a deep kiss that made Anthony shiver, another wave of pleasure throbbing through him.

They got into a cuddle-pile, lazy, content. But it didn't take long for the passion to rise again, for sleepy, tender kisses to become more sensual, more needy, for hands to roam and cocks to harden.

This time, Sören and Anthony lay on their sides, facing each other. Anthony hooked a leg around Sören's waist and Sören filled him, kissing him when they were fully joined, two become one. Anthony sighed with pleasure at the feel of the bead in Sören's piercing rubbing slowly against that place inside him, and groaned at the smouldering look in Sören's brown eyes, like Sören could eat him alive.

Dooku got behind Sören, wrapping his arms around Sören's chest. Sören gasped as Dooku took him, and began to thrust into Anthony harder, more insistent, as Dooku thrust into him. Anthony kissed Sören, nibbled on Sören's lower lip. "We've got you," he whispered. "Your brothers take care of you."

Maglor was watching, stroking himself, and after a moment he came closer. He got between Sören and Anthony and they began to lick his cock together - the sight of Sören's tongue all over Maglor's cock made Anthony crazy, crazier because they were sharing it, lewd and debauched. Sören sucked for a minute and then Anthony did, taking turns, and then they licked at Maglor's cock again. Dooku kissed Sören's neck and shoulder. "That's it," Dooku purred, playing with one of Sören's nipples. "That's a good boy..."

"Mmmmf," Sören whimpered, sucking Maglor again, harder.

"Good boy," Dooku husked, and nipped at Sören's neck.

When Anthony got closer, Sören reached between them, gripping Anthony's cock firm and tight, stroking. Anthony groaned, getting even more worked up when Sören collected Maglor's precum on his tongue and pulled Anthony into a kiss, tongues rubbing together, teasing, playful. Anthony thrust into Sören's hand. Dooku rocked into Sören harder, and Sören picked up the pace, moving inside Anthony faster. Sören sucked Maglor's cock as Anthony licked and sucked Maglor's balls, and when Maglor was ready to come he aimed for Sören's face, Sören's tongue. Anthony licked the seed from Sören's face and as they kissed, sharing the seed between them, Sören and Anthony came together. Three thrusts later, Dooku shuddered against Sören, moaning into his shoulder.

Maglor got behind Anthony, spooning him, strong arms holding him safe. Maglor tilted Anthony's face to his and kissed him, then Sören leaned closer so he could kiss Maglor too. Sören and Anthony rubbed noses, and Anthony smiled, snuggling against Sören, feeling Dooku's hand petting his hair.

"So long as we have each other, everything will be all right," Dooku said, and kissed Sören's cheek. "I truly feel the worst is behind us now."

"For once, I hope I'm wrong and you're right, Ñolo," Sören muttered.

"As you know, you've been wrong a bit more than once, Fëanáro."

Maglor chuckled. "The more things change..." He kissed the tip of Sören's nose.

Thousands of years later, their love stayed the same. There was power in that, and Anthony held onto it, like a light in the dark.

—

The next day, Anthony took Sören and Sören's kids down to Sydney Harbour, to the park by the bridge where they'd been before. It was a warm spring day, with beautiful blue skies, the Harbour was crystal blue, and it was one of the last chances they would get to see the Harbour in a long time - Anthony didn't think they'd be returning to Sydney frequently after they went to Ceduna.

For awhile Anthony and Sören just sat and looked at the view, while Kate and Tori crawled around in the grass nearby, and baby Søren snuggled in his carriage. Anthony was going to miss Sydney, which had grown on him... but he was ready to move on. Ready to settle down with the family he'd found again, chosen again. Even so, he drank in the sight of the Harbour, the Opera House, the bridge. The memories he'd made here, the first chapter of a new act of his life, forty-one going on forever.

Little Søren woke up from his nap and started to make fussy noises. Sören went over, took the baby out of the carriage, and after holding him for a few seconds, Sören nodded, making a face. "He needs to be changed, so we should head back."

"OK." Anthony nodded, and went to collect Kate, putting her in the stroller, then came back for Tori. Just before he could put Tori in the stroller, two large ravens flew out of a cloud, and down, heading towards them. Anthony didn't see too many ravens around, so this was unusual in and of itself, but something else about it made his hair stand on end, his heart beating just a little faster.

Right after Anthony put Tori in the stroller, one of the ravens alighted on Anthony's shoulder, and the other on Sören's shoulder, like the ravens knew them, and were claiming them as their people.

"Hello," Sören said. "I was wondering where Huginn and Muninn were..."

Odin's ravens. Except... more than that. A memory from Anthony's life as Finarfin, keeping a bird menagerie, and two messenger ravens. No doubt, they had been given to Odin, possibly by Manwë himself, and now that they were free of Odin's influence, they had returned.

"Is that who you are?" Sören asked.

"Quork," said the raven on Sören's shoulder. "Thought."

"Quork," said the raven on Anthony's shoulder. "Memory."

"Pretty bird," Anthony said, feeling like an idiot for saying it, but there was a familiar tenderness.

One that was returned, Muninn nuzzling Anthony with his beak. "Father. Quork. Daaaaaaaaaaad."

Sören giggled, delighted. "I guess we've got birds now, too."

Anthony smiled, and reached up to stroke the raven's feathers, pleased when the raven accepted his touch. "Say nevermore," he prompted Muninn.

"Quork. You don't run my life, Daaaaad."

Sören threw back his head and laughed. Anthony doubled over. "Wow," Anthony said, wiping tears from his eyes. "Just... wow."

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