

To Loose The Fateful Lightning

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To Loose The Fateful Lightning

by [DumpsterPhoenix \(verhalen\)](#)

Summary

"We were guaranteed eternity; we were never guaranteed happiness."

As Sören gets more in touch with his inner Fëanor, reclaiming his power and purpose, he finds out that his biggest enemy may not be the Valar, Sauron or Morgoth, but himself. Will the love of his partners be able to help him? Or will history repeat itself, with the House of Finwë sundered once more?

The conclusion of the Northern Lights universe.

Notes

This is an AU, a different version of Earth from ours where some things are the same (Trump was elected US President in 2016, yuck) and some things are different (a minority of the population is Force-sensitive; COVID never happened here). At the time of writing (2021) this fic takes place in the future (2030+). I have no idea how accurate this Earth's 2030+ will be compared to ours, and as an AU, I really don't think "lining up" accuracy is all that important.

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 [2021-early 2022], 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.



There is nothing with which every man is so afraid as getting to know how enormously much he is capable of doing and becoming.
— Søren Kierkegaard

He is trampling out the vintage where the grapes of wrath are stored;
He hath loosed the fateful lightning of His terrible swift sword;
His truth is marching on.
— Battle Hymn of the Republic

I do not aim with my hand. He who aims with his hand has forgotten the face of his father.
I aim with my eye.
I do not shoot with my hand. He who shoots with his hand has forgotten the face of his father.
I shoot with my mind.
I do not kill with my gun. He who kills with his gun has forgotten the face of his father.

I kill with my heart.
— Gunslinger's Creed

Whoever fights monsters should see to it that in the process he does not become a
monster.

And if you gaze long enough into an abyss, the abyss will gaze back into you.
— Friedrich Nietzsche

Chapter 1

May 2032

Ceduna, South Australia

Sören Sigurðsson wiped the sweat from his brow and stepped out of the forge, looking out at a bright, clear blue sky, and a field of sheep bleating, herded from place to place by the family's dogs Auli and Huan.

His son and two daughters were at school on a Thursday, and two of his three partners, Maglor and Nicolae Dooku, were out grocery shopping. His half-Aboriginal maternal cousin, Darren, was walking over the fields, watching over the sheep. Darren's sister Ali and their mother Medika were inside the larger of the two houses on the property, probably doing chores or knitting. Sören had taken up glass blowing over the last decade he'd lived on his aunt's sheep farm on the outskirts of Ceduna, and currently he was working on a set of artisan glass beads to sell on an online shop, under the alias he'd been using since he was relocated to Australia in 2020. But he'd been in the forge all morning and he needed a break, needed some air. It was a good time to take a walk by himself, so he could come back to the forge fresh and more in tune with the vision he had for this set of glass beads.

Though it was late Australian fall, it was still a warm day, enough that Sören was wearing a grey tank top with his jeans. Strolling through the grass and scrub of the sheep farm, past the occasional tree, watching the kookaburras, it was peaceful. But Sören knew that peace was sort of an illusion. Most days were quiet, where he and his family lived a normal life doing everyday things. They were not a normal, everyday family.

Sören was one of a tiny minority of humans born with a psi power that Dooku called "the Force", a term from an old mentor. Force users had to keep themselves hidden to not cause unrest, but in 2020 his fraternal twin brother Dag had used the Force in public and was abducted a short time later; MI6 had then relocated Sören and his partners to Australia for their own safety, where Sören had discovered he had relatives he'd never known about. Sören was forty-seven now, and had been immortal for almost thirteen years, given immortality by a god who'd taken keen interest in his relationship with Maglor. That relationship continued their connection from a past life, when Sören had been Fëanor, the Flame Imperishable made flesh. As it turned out that god was interested for the wrong reasons, and there had been a battle with the god and his comrades eleven years ago. Their other enemies were still at large - the Valar, who had cursed them with the Doom, as well as Sauron and Morgoth - but Sören and his family had decided to take some breathing room afterwards, still badly shaken by an incident where Balrogs attacked them and had killed Sören's uncle Böðvar, Sören's girlfriend Frankie, and Ali's partner Kenny. By extension Sören had also lost his sister Margrèt, who had taken the Straight Road and reclaimed her identity as Findis, in her grief and trauma. The wounds sometimes still stung, and the family had taken refuge in some semblance of mundanity out here on the sheep farm, recoiling not just from the horror of the experience of battling supernatural entities, but the madness of the revelation that the world was much more complicated and terrifying than they had ever been aware of, even as Force sensitives.

That especially included Sören's third partner, Anthony Hewlett-Johnson, who worked for MI6 - he had been assigned to keep an eye on them and inevitably he and Sören had fallen in love, rekindling their ancient bond as Fëanor and Finarfin. Anthony worked for a department that on the record didn't exist, dealing with paranormal activity. It was literally

his job to know about these things, and it had still shaken him to his core, even more so when Sören had passed on the gift of immortality to save Anthony's life. Anthony was fifty-two and didn't look a day over forty; his status as an immortal Force-sensitive was an asset in his line of work, ensuring him a permanent job.

Nonetheless, Sören was worried about him. On Sunday night Anthony had gotten a call to report to headquarters in London for an emergency meeting, which had never happened in the eleven years they'd been together. Anthony had to maintain radio silence about the whole thing for security reasons, which Sören understood, but it still gave him concerns as to whether or not Anthony was all right - if Anthony would come back, if he'd run into trouble or if MI6 had decided Anthony's assets were now a liability.

Looking at the big sky and the fields of grass, which seemed to go on forever, Sören's thoughts were with Anthony again. *Please be OK. Please come back to me. I miss you.*

Now Sören felt agitated, which was the wrong sort of energy that he wanted to return to the forge with. Each set of glass beads expressed a mood or a moment, trying to capture the ephemeral in swirls of color, flashes of light. Each set of glass beads was almost like a set of amulets, to transfer that energy to the recipient. This particular set expressed hope and strength in waiting, serene blues and stable browns with subtle threads of orange and fuchsia and lavender and gold, like counting the sunrises and sunsets until the time came, like carrying secret fire to keep warm. He sighed and looked down at his Doc Martens, frustrated with himself for getting worked up again. *Anthony's a big boy.* But with each day that passed since Anthony had gone out to London, Sören felt more and more uneasy. He'd known too many surprise, unexpected losses to be able to completely trust that Anthony would return unharmed.

He needed something to hold onto, something that reminded him of Anthony. Cake immediately came to mind - it was a wonder Anthony kept his six-pack, with his love of cake, but then he was pretty fastidious about keeping fit. Baking would be a good distraction, and the kids would probably be happy to have a piece of cake when they got home from school.

Sören headed back in the direction of the forge, which had been built a few months after they moved from Sydney, adjacent to a workout room. Several meters away was the house where Sören, his partners, children, and cats lived. He walked in the front door and his tuxedo cat, Snúður, greeted him at the door, tail high in the air, meowing like he'd been alone for days instead of hours. Pumpkin, Rasputin and Craig came rushing out, making a choir, circling around him. Sören chuckled, stooping down to give them all pettings. "I know, it's terrible I wasn't here all morning to slave over you," he teased.

"MROWWWWWWWRRRR," Snúður scolded, as if to say "not funny, Dad".

Sören took off his Doc Martens, then washed his hands, lay out the ingredients to make a lemon cake, and began preheating the oven. It wasn't long before Sören found it too hot in the kitchen, and took off his tank top. As he debated whether or not to take off his jeans too, the cats were circling again, meowing, pretending that their food dish wasn't half-full. Sören rolled his eyes and gave in, opening a new can of cat food so they wouldn't try to jump up on the counter, or on him, and get into the cake batter. After he served the food and watched the cats migrate to the new dish of food, he got to work assembling the ingredients in a bowl. Just as he was stirring the batter in the bowl, he heard keys in the front door. He paused, and reached out with the Force - habitual, instinctive - and it wasn't Dooku and Maglor returning from the store... it was Anthony.

Anthony opened the door and for a moment he just stood there and they looked at each

other. Sören drank in the sight of him - six-two, lean but muscular and broad-shouldered, short and neat black hair, wide-set, expressive green eyes, classically handsome features, a generous mouth. Today he was wearing faded jeans and a light blue button-down short-sleeve shirt; Sören's eyes wandered to the hair on Anthony's arms, the veins in his forearms. Sören never got tired of looking at him, especially now after not having seen him in days. Sören felt so relieved to see him again that he felt close to tears.

Not thinking, just feeling, Sören ran right over, carrying the spoon he was using to stir the batter. Anthony took Sören in his arms and then he laughed as he noticed Sören holding the spoon.

"It's like you were summoned," Sören said. "The Cake Signal!" He held out the spoon. "Here, taste."

Anthony licked the spoon - Sören's cock stirred, thinking about what else that tongue could do - and then he drew Sören into a deep, needy kiss. They both moaned into the kiss, and Sören moaned again as Anthony's hands slid over his bare chest, thumbs brushing Sören's pierced nipples. Anthony's hands moved out to Sören's arms, fingers tracing the patterns of the ink - full sleeves, flames on one arm, ocean waves on the other - as if he'd committed Sören's tattoos to memory. Then his hands were on Sören's back, roaming over the firebird and waterbird, before his fingers wandered down Sören's spine, making him shiver. Sören savored the sweetness of the lemon cake batter on Anthony's tongue, and the sensual play of their tongues swirling together, licking together before they kissed again. Sören trembled as he felt Anthony go hard against him in his jeans. Across their Force bond, Sören could feel how pent up Anthony was - it had been days - and Sören responded with heat and hunger of his own. Many couples lost interest in each other sexually long-term, but they were still as horny for each other as when their love was new; if anything, Sören thought the sex had gotten better as the years went on, with how well they had learned each other's bodies, what they liked. Sören felt utterly consumed now, nothing else mattering but wanting to feel Anthony's kiss, his touch, aching to feel Anthony inside him.

One of Anthony's hands came back over to Sören's torso and his fingers touched Sören's stomach. Sören shivered again, and the rest of the cake batter on the spoon ended up spilling down his chest. "Shit," Sören laughed.

With a wicked grin, Anthony's tongue followed the trail of batter over Sören's bare chest. His tongue circled a nipple, then lapped at it. He tugged the nipple ring with his teeth, then his teeth tugged the nipple itself, before he suckled it hard, licked it some more. Sören whimpered, the spoon dropping and clattering on the floor before he clutched at Anthony's head. Anthony turned his head to give the other nipple the same love, and their eyes met as Anthony kissed his heart. Anthony licked back up, this time his tongue on Sören's sternum, his shoulder, his neck, knowing how sensitive Sören was. Sören cried out and grabbed his hips, tight. "Oh god, fuck me," Sören panted. He needed it *now*.

Anthony took Sören's face in his hands and kissed him fiercely. Sören began to unbutton Anthony's shirt, hands shaking, feverish. Anthony kicked off his brogues and reached down to undo Sören's jeans. They took off each other's clothes as quickly as they could, letting them fall to the floor, not caring. Sören ran his hands over Anthony's naked body, enjoying the sight and feel of his chest hair, the firm six pack, the delicious treasure trail, the hairy thighs. Their hard cocks rubbed together as they kissed, and Anthony possessively hooked a finger through the ring of Sören's Prince Albert piercing. Sören gasped for breath before he kissed Anthony back, urgently growling into his mind, *Now. Now, fuck me now.*

Anthony outstretched a hand and Sören glanced to watch the bottle of vegetable oil rise from the kitchen counter and fly over to Anthony's hand. Anthony anointed his cock right there, and used the Force to put the oil down on the floor just before he grabbed Sören, picked him up, and slammed him against the wall. Sören's legs went around Anthony's waist, his arms draped over Anthony's back. With a hungry kiss Anthony pushed into him; Sören cried out and Anthony groaned once he was all the way inside.

Anthony fucked him hard, holding Sören up against the wall. Sören loved it, calling out "oh shit, oh god, yes, fuck me, yes," rocking his hips back at Anthony, giving it back as good as he got. They kissed again and again, tongues rubbing together between kisses. After a few kisses Anthony sucked on Sören's lower lip, bit it. Sören gasped for breath, nails digging in Anthony's back. Anthony growled, sending another shiver through Sören, nipples and cock hardening even more. Anthony started kissing Sören's neck. "Missed you so much," Anthony husked. "God, I fucking need you."

"I need you too," Sören panted. Even though Maglor and Dooku had taken care of him plenty the last few days, his partners weren't interchangeable; each of them gave him something different, something necessary. Just a few days had felt like weeks. Sören felt ready to cry again with relief, and the intensity of the love he felt right now, the feeling of completion, of *rightness* as Anthony took him.

Anthony nibbled Sören's neck, licked it, licked his way up to Sören's beard, kissing along his jaw, before their mouths met again. With their foreheads pressed together, they breathed each other's breath, and the heat in those emerald eyes sent Sören right to that edge, almost there.

Anthony wasn't done yet. He stopped thrusting, and with Sören still on his cock, Sören's arms and legs still around him, Anthony carried him a few feet to the couch. He turned around and pushed Sören down onto the couch, and with Sören's legs on his shoulders, he pounded into Sören even harder, faster. Sören screamed and reached down to stroke himself frantically, completely lost in lust for Anthony's sculpted body, sweat beginning to dampen his hair and chest hair. Anthony's cock rubbed that sweet spot inside him just right, hitting that perfect note over and over again, balls slapping against him, and Sören loved being taken like this, the primal, savage fuck that for these moments, was the only thing that existed.

Anthony's hand was on his now, taking Sören's hand and making him jerk himself faster. Sören moaned, bit his lower lip and whimpered. "I'm so close," Sören gasped.

Anthony groaned. His other hand slid over Sören's thigh and stomach. Sören whimpered again, put his other hand on Anthony's wrist, nails digging. Their eyes locked, and Anthony ground out, "Come for me."

Sören screamed through clenched teeth as his orgasm surged through him, seed spurting over his own chest, then spraying over Anthony. Anthony threw back his head and cried out, climaxing as Sören came on him, and the feel of Anthony's seed flowing inside his throbbing passage made Sören spurt again, howling. Anthony gave that shuddery sigh Sören loved, then he doubled over, shaking, gasping. "Fuck," Anthony said. His face lit up and he laughed, with that brilliant smile that stole Sören's heart each time. Sören reached up to stroke his cheek.

"I love you," Sören breathed.

"I love you too." Anthony pulled out, and then he climbed over Sören. Sören's arms encircled him and they kissed deeply before Anthony snuggled into Sören's shoulder,

catching his breath. Sören closed his eyes as he melted in bliss, their hearts racing together and at last slowing, deep cozy contentment rolling over their Force bond.

They lay there for a few minutes, recovering, and then Anthony picked his head up and rained kisses over Sören's face, making him giggle. Anthony kissed the tip of Sören's nose, and they rubbed noses before Anthony sighed, "It's good to be home."

"It's good to have you home."

"Unfortunately, I won't be able to stay long."

"Oh god." Sören felt alarm, shattering the post-orgasmic glow. He started to sit up; Anthony climbed off and they sat together on the couch, still naked. "What... what happened? Can you talk about it? Are you in trou -"

Anthony put a finger to Sören's lips. "Actually, this affects you too."

Sören swallowed hard and braced himself. When they'd relocated to Sydney in 2020, MI6 had encouraged them to stay until Sören's daughters were fully grown, so at least eighteen years - Sören and his partners would necessarily need to move and change identities once every one to two decades due to virtue of not aging anymore, which would arouse too much suspicion especially with Dooku, who would be eighty-four in December and looked sixtysomething, and in athletic condition. They had only been in Australia twelve years. Sören didn't want to have to move again. *Or worse.* Anthony had gone to an emergency meeting. That suggested MI6 had been compromised. Or...

Anthony exhaled. "They think they found Dag."

Sören's eyes widened. He couldn't believe what he just heard. He blinked slowly. MI6 hadn't been able to get a lead on where Dag was and the trail had been cold for years; Dag was presumed dead. Sören's heart skipped a beat and now the tears came, not wanting to get his hopes up, but... "Dag. They found... Dag?"

Anthony nodded. His own eyes were too bright; Anthony and Dag had only met once, completely by accident, when Dag was sixteen and visiting London, and Anthony was twenty-one and newly in the Royal Navy, just before 9/11 when he would be deployed to the Gulf. Of course, it hadn't been a coincidence - Dag was the reincarnation of Finrod, Finarfin's son. Anthony had Finarfin's memories; Finrod had been very dear to him.

"There's a rescue mission being planned," Anthony said. "I'm leaving again in three days. I'll bring back your brother." *My son.*

Sören's jaw set. On impulse, not able to help it, he snarled, "I'm coming with you."

Anthony facepalmed, then pinched the bridge of his nose before he shook his head firmly. "No, Sören, you're not."

"I'm Force sensitive. I know Krav Maga. I know how to use a gun. I can set things on fire with my mind. I'm immortal, I'm hard to kill. I killed a Balrog. I killed gods -"

"*And you're not a trained operative.* Look, Sören..." Anthony took a deep breath. "I know. I *know* it's been hell, since your brother was taken. Since what happened with... the Balrogs." Anthony didn't need or want to repeat the story of bloodshed and carnage that day they'd lost three of their own. "I know how powerless you've felt. I know how *angry* you are, wanting to go out there and kick some arse. I don't fault you for that, at all

whatsoever. But. *A terrorist cell has him.* We are taking operatives who've had years of training specifically for situations like this. You have not had that training. You're good, but you're not an agent, and that lack of training *will* make a difference if and when shit hits the fan, I can't have a liability to my team or your brother. And your kids need you here."

Sören scowled, but he knew Anthony was right. "OK fine."

"Good." Anthony patted him. "I'm sorry, sweetheart. I know." He reached out and gave Sören a hug, and Sören fell apart, frustrated and furious that he couldn't go save his brother, resenting the way he had all this power but there was so much about his life that was outside of his control. "I'm so sorry." Anthony started to cry too. Then he leaned up, took Sören's chin in his hand, and blinked back tears, giving Sören a look of fierce determination. "But three days, your brother will be on the way home. OK? I will get him back."

Sören nodded and sniffled, then the tears broke again. Anthony pulled him close, rocked him.

"It's going to be all right," Anthony whispered, petting Sören's curls, rubbing his back. "It'll be OK. It'll be all right, love."

Sören wanted to believe him, but he was terrified. Not just for Anthony's sake, on a dangerous mission, but he felt like everything was starting to escalate again, that their time of peace and normalcy was swiftly coming to an end.

Chapter 2

Sören's head was pounding as he stirred awake. It was very similar to the times he'd had a bad hangover, but he hadn't had anything to drink.

He made a noise as he moved his stiff body, sore from sleeping in the back seat of the vehicle, buckled in, for however long it was. When he opened his eyes to darkness, he touched his face and remembered he had a blindfold on. Then the rest of it came back to him.

They were on the way to "The Shop", the name Anthony gave to the popup hospitals MI6's off-the-record paranormal division used for emergencies involving their agents or their charges, where it was too risky to admit them into a regular hospital; Anthony had been in The Shop himself eleven years ago after getting attacked by an ambush of Balrogs.

MI6 had initially wanted Sören to wait until Dagnýr was ready to be discharged and sent home with him in Ceduna, and Sören threw a fit, saying, "I've waited twelve fucking years to see my brother and god help you if you stand in my way." So after Anthony's negotiations, MI6 had conceded to let Sören see his brother in The Shop, contingent on Sören being blindfolded on the way there and back so he wouldn't know the location of the facility - Sören thought this was ridiculous, since it was a temporary hospital, until Anthony explained that they tended to reuse the same sites if possible because those sites were fairly secluded, with low risk of outsiders stumbling across it. The visit was also contingent upon Sören being drugged, with his informed consent, so he couldn't guess location from travel time. If it had been anyone but Anthony bringing him to the facility, Sören wouldn't have gone through with it, but he trusted Anthony with his life, and through the entire procedure of injecting the sedative, Anthony kept saying "I'm sorry, I'm sorry," his guilt - and annoyance this was necessary - so palpable across their Force bond it made Sören ache for him, to the point of needing to give Anthony a hug when it was done. "I'mnotmadatyou," Sören slurred before he fell into Anthony's arms...

...and that was the last thing he remembered.

He was waking up now, and the anticipation of seeing his brother made his heart start pounding. He needed to see his brother *now*. He also needed to stop feeling so wretched - sore, dry mouth, headache. He made a noise of discomfort.

"You're awake," came Anthony's voice from the front seat. "We're almost there."

"Do you have any water or something up there? I'm fucking dying back here."

A couple of minutes later, Sören felt something gently land in his lap, floated down. It was a cold bottle of water. The vehicle itself was air conditioned, but this suggested Anthony kept a cooler. Though Sören was tightly blindfolded, he was able to feel enough to unscrew the bottle and bring it to his lips, taking a deep sip, utterly parched. "Do you have something for the bloody headache?"

"I do, but... after the visit with your brother, I'm going to need to inject you with the same shite so you're better off just taking it once we're back home."

"Jesus *Christ*." Sören felt ready to spit. He knew, once again, this was protocol and Anthony hated it, so it wasn't Anthony's fault, but he still felt himself bristling.

"You're doing this for Dag," Anthony said, sensing his lover's irritation across their bond. "Just remember. You'll be seeing Dag very soon. After twelve years, we finally got him."

It was hard to believe. Sören remembered the emergency call from Gandalf, who had been keeping an eye on Dag in Toronto, saying that Dag hadn't returned home when expected from his birthday date with his husband Matt. He remembered how MI6 had determined Dag had been taken, and the trip to Canada to get Dag's daughters, Sören's promise as their godfather to look after them if anything happened. The memories felt as clear as if they had been yesterday and yet... it felt like longer than twelve years. Time was more of a suggestion now that Sören was immortal, and twelve years usually wasn't even a drop in the bucket to those who had been alive for ages like Maglor. But it had been a very long twelve years since Dag disappeared, eleven years since Margrét took the Straight Road back to the Undying Lands... over a decade as the last of his siblings, a modern-day, new-incarnation reversal of how Fëanor had been the first Finwion to go, and Finrod's father Finarfin had been the last survivor. Sören could not imagine how Finarfin had borne it - in the end, badly, as he'd gone on a suicide mission to Gondolin to fight Balrogs alongside Maglor's son Ecthelion. Sören had tried very hard to put one foot in front of the other for the sake of his partners, the sake of his children. But it had felt like something had been ripped out of him and bleeding, all this time. It had been safer to assume Dag was dead, with the trail long cold. And that grief made time pass much more slowly, like he'd been frozen.

And now, Dag was not dead, and it hurt, like the way a sleeping limb burned with pins and needles waking up again. After the Balrog attack eleven years ago, where Kenny, Frankie, and his uncle had been killed, and Anthony came close to death, something had changed in Sören - he had immortality but he didn't know if the future was worth it, with their enemies afoot - with so much evil in the world, a world where someone like Dag could be kidnapped and held prisoner for some government or terrorist cell's evil plans to exploit his Force sensitivity. Sören didn't want to dare to hope again, lest his wings melt in the sun and he fall down the abyss of despair. He was almost angry that this was happening now, after twelve years, where he'd resigned himself to the way things were.

Almost angry. He couldn't be mad at Dag. More than anything, he just wanted to see his brother, alive. It was a miracle that Dag had been found at all, with the trail long cold, and Sören had been going out of his mind waiting for the rescue mission, like he was going to explode from the anticipation. Now Dag was safe - for the time being - and alive. Sören was still completely stunned that any of this was happening. And it couldn't happen quickly enough. Sören felt like yelling *drive faster* at Anthony, but he had a feeling Anthony was already going as fast as the speed limit would allow.

Anthony sensed it and chuckled. "Almost there, babe."

A couple minutes later, Sören heard the click of the turn signal. He felt the vehicle slow down, and slow and slow, as if it was pulling in somewhere. Sören's breath hitched and his body tensed, feeling ready to spring - they were here, wherever "here" was. Any minute now, he was going to see Dag. After twelve years. Alive.

Sören fought the urge to scream *LET ME OUT ALREADY* as he heard Anthony get out of the vehicle - he knew Anthony could only move so fast. Then Sören's door was unlocked, and Anthony unbuckled him and helped him out of the backseat. Anthony maneuvered Sören to walk forward - Sören was annoyed he still had to keep the blindfold on, though he understood protocol was protocol - and after a couple dozen steps through an air-conditioned building, Anthony stopped him and took off Sören's blindfold.

Sören looked around - they were in a dark, seemingly abandoned warehouse, but Sören could sense other presences in the Force, and he heard muffled voices and footsteps down a hall. Anthony put his fingers in his mouth and whistled. "Black Swan," he called down.

Sören raised an eyebrow. "That's my codename," Anthony explained.

Sören snickered. *Was that before or after the Ara thing?* he spoke into Anthony's mind.

Before. Anthony smirked. *I've never disclosed my past life history to them, anyway. We all work on a need-to-know basis only. They don't need to know I used to be a King of the Noldor.*

Still are. Sören put a hand on Anthony's shoulder.

Two bodies approached down the darkened hall, coming into view as a bald, elderly male doctor in a white lab coat, and a fortysomething woman in a black pantsuit with a black bob haircut who Sören assumed was an agent. "Captain Hewlett-Johnson," the agent said. She turned to Sören. "Mister Kierkegaard," she addressed him by his alias.

Sören still bristled at being addressed by a surname - which was only marginally better than being addressed by his patronymic, something that always made him cringe; a decade and he still wasn't used to it. But he gave a curt nod. "Hello."

"Come," the doctor said, speaking with a clipped European accent Sören couldn't place. "I will take you to your brother."

Sören's heart pounded with every step, echoing down the hall. When they got closer to the room, Sören heard the familiar beeps and blips of various monitors. He swallowed hard, hoping he wasn't about to see Dag in a coma, kept alive by machines.

But there he was, sitting up, awake and seemingly alert - the machines were just standard procedure to keep an eye on him after whatever it is he'd been through in captivity. And the first thing Sören noticed was that Dagnýr certainly looked like hell. It wasn't just the unflattering hospital scrubs. And it wasn't just the wear of age - Dag was forty-seven now, just like him, and Dag wasn't immortal, so he expected some aging; Dag's hair was now mostly silver and that wasn't a bad look for him. But Dag looked like he'd lost twenty to thirty pounds, and he'd always been thin, now he looked frail. There were dark hollows under his eyes and he was unhealthily pale, like he hadn't seen the sun in years. Sunken cheeks. A heavy growth of stubble.

The worst part was his grey eyes, staring off into space, like he'd seen things that could not be unseen.

Protocol be damned, Sören rushed over. His first instinct was to throw his arms around his long-lost brother, but Dag immediately flinched as if he was afraid of touch. That alone brought tears to Sören's eyes - he wanted so badly to hug his brother, after so long, and it hurt to know something had traumatized him enough he couldn't be touched - but Sören tried to keep himself together and pulled up a chair at Dag's bedside.

"You have twenty minutes," the agent said, before she closed the door, leaving Sören alone with Dag.

Sören glared at the agent through the glass window in the door - he'd come all this way, taken all this trouble of *drugs and a blindfold and however many hours of travel* just to get

here, he hadn't seen his brother for *twelve years*, thought he was dead, and was only allowed twenty minutes? But looking back at Dag, who looked almost afraid of him, Sören could see now why maybe that rule was in place - perhaps any more would overload him.

Sören didn't even know what to say. It felt like everything he could possibly say was wrong somehow. "Glad to see you again" - he wasn't glad to see Dag like *this*. "Glad you're OK" - Dag wasn't OK, clearly. "Glad you're alive" - was Dag glad to be alive? Was he so badly traumatized he wished for death?

Sören tried to reach out across their Force bond - as twin brothers, their bond had once been so strong they could use telepathy on different continents - and it felt like he was running into a wall. Sören rubbed his face, tried to sense more gently, and ran into that mental wall again. He wondered if it was the drugs, or Dag's trauma, or something else.

Sören looked into Dag's eyes, which didn't quite meet his own, looking slightly off into the distance. Sören found himself reaching out with one hand. "May I..."

Dag nodded.

Sören took Dag's hand; it was like ice. Sören squeezed it and began to gently rub Dag's hand. It felt so bony, compared to before the capture.

"How... how are you?" Sören asked. Even that simple question felt like there were a thousand ways it could go wrong, but he didn't want to just say nothing.

Dag replied in Icelandic, which surprised Sören - Dag had been living in English-speaking countries even longer than he had; Sören had been speaking Icelandic less and less, where he thought as much in English if not more so. But he supposed it was natural that Dag would revert to their native language under stress. "I've seen better days."

"Jæja, I guess so." Sören exhaled. "Well, when they say you're ready to leave, we're going to take you home."

"Where's home? Are you still in Akureyri?"

Sören gave a nervous laugh and shook his head. "No. We got... relocated... shortly after you were taken."

"Re... located."

Sören nodded solemnly. "We live in Australia now."

Dag raised an eyebrow. "Australia. All three of you?"

"We live with our cousin. No, not Ari. We have cousins on our mother's side of the family - our uncle moved to Australia in 1989 and settled down with an Aboriginal woman. We were never told about it because, well, you know how Katrín and Einar were."

Dag said nothing. Sören didn't quite understand the lack of reaction, except maybe Dag had enough recent trauma without thinking about their shitty alcoholic guardians.

Sören went on, "And it's not just the three of us. There's Anthony. And I have your daughters. I kept my promise that I'd look after them if something happened to you. I... have a son now, too. Biological, not adopted."

"I thought you were gay."

Sören laughed. He realized he'd never told Dag about his feelings for Frankie. It did seem like a strange question, since Dag had been married to a man himself and used a surrogate for his daughters, so Dag knew gay people could have kids, but... "Mostly. I made an exception, and... a happy accident happened."

"Does the mother live with you too?"

"No." Sören blinked back tears. He still missed Frankie, after all this time. "She's dead."

"Matt's dead," Dag said matter-of-factly, his voice cold, like he was describing the color of the wall or the temperature of the room.

Sören suspected that - Matt was never brought up when Anthony had mentioned Dag was found, Matt hadn't been mentioned at all through this entire thing - but it was one thing to assume and another thing to have that news confirmed. He hadn't known Matt well, but the news still punched him in the heart. The tears Sören had been holding back spilled down his cheeks, silently. "I'm so sorry." He squeezed his brother's hand again. He knew he probably shouldn't press it, but his curiosity was getting the better of him - he had so many questions. "Did they at least let you guys be together -"

"No," Dag said. "They kept us isolated. Matt tried to escape and was shot. They showed me a video."

The only thing Sören could think of that was worse than being held prisoner by god-knows-who for twelve years, with whatever being done to his body that made Dag look the way he did now, was having one's partner executed and being forced to watch it on video. The thought of that happening to Dooku, or Anthony, or Maglor...

Sören shuddered.

"I am so, so, so sorry." Sören's heart broke for him. He wanted to hug Dag, but he held back.

Dag put out his arms, hesitantly. "I'm sorry I flinched. It's not you..."

"It's whatever they did to you. I know." Sören put out his own arms. "Are you sure?"

Dag nodded.

Sören grabbed him, pulled him close, and held him as tight as he could, never wanting to let go. Now the tears were less silent, as a cascade of emotions flooded over him. There was relief that Dag was alive - worse for wear, but *alive*. Dag had been restored to him, when all hope for that had been lost, and that meant maybe, just maybe, everything would be OK somehow. There was grief for what Dag had been through - Sören didn't know, apart from Dag being kept from his husband, and being forced to watch Matt being shot to death; he knew enough to know Dag's captors were monsters - grief for the frail body that Sören was afraid of breaking with the strength of his hug, grief for the haunted eyes, the broken soul. There was *rage* at whoever had held Dag for twelve years, tortured him, done whatever else...

Sören once again resented that he couldn't go on the rescue mission. He wasn't angry with Anthony so much as he was just *angry*. He knew of course that urge to make them all pay, make them all suffer, was precisely why he couldn't come - it wasn't just lack of

mission training, it was that MI6 probably wanted some of these people alive for informational purposes and Sören would have killed every last one of them. The fury he'd shown the Norse gods for the hell they'd put his family through would be nothing compared to what he would have done to whoever it was that hurt Dag like this.

He could feel that fury rising within him now, the hysteria. In his mind's eye he saw burning boats. It was one of the deepest regrets of the Fëanor part of Sören, and yet Sören knew he would do it again.

Sören pushed away the memory of the ship-burning and rocked Dag, who was just letting himself be held and not otherwise reacting in any way - no tears. Sören knew Dag was probably numb after his ordeal; in the weeks following his breakup from Justin Roberts, his ex who had raped him repeatedly, Sören hadn't been able to cry or feel much of anything either. Sören had enough tears for both himself and Dag. He heard himself weeping brokenly, almost ashamed of the inhuman noises he was making, but he hurt *so much* for the horror his brother had known... horror he'd been powerless to stop.

You killed gods, you couldn't save your own brother.

That looped into the self-loathing always at the back of Sören's mind since the day of the Balrogs. *You couldn't save Frankie. You couldn't save Kenny. You couldn't save your uncle.*

Then, the deepest wound of all. *You couldn't save your sons. Ñolo. Ara. They died for you.*

Sören pushed those thoughts away, too. *Fuck's sake this isn't about you, be here for Dag.* "It's OK," Sören whispered, even though he knew they had a long, hard road ahead of them - twelve years was a long time for a mortal, going through captivity and isolation every day, and probably also regular torture, over the course of twelve years was enough to break a person, possibly beyond repair. Sören knew from his own experience with trauma - things that had happened decades ago that still haunted him - that Dag might not ever be truly OK. But he had to try to do what he could to help his brother heal, in the ways Dag could heal. "It's OK," Sören whispered, rocking him. "I've got you. Your brother's got you. You're going to come home, and I'll take care of you, and it'll be all right. You'll be safe again. It'll be OK -"

"I will never be safe again," Dag said, his voice flat, his eyes staring past Sören.

Sören fell apart, crying even harder. He wanted so much for that statement to be *not true* but he knew it was closer to the truth than saying it would be OK. Right now, Dag was in a bad place - still imprisoned in his own mind - and it hurt *so much* that Sören couldn't free him, couldn't help him -

The noise of Sören's tears attracted the attention of the staff, and the door opened, with one of the nurses saying, "You have to leave now."

"It hasn't been twenty minutes -"

Two big bruiser types stepped behind the nurse, indicating that if Sören didn't remove himself from the room, they would. While Sören doubted they were Force-sensitive like he was, and he was a Krav Maga practitioner on top of that, he didn't want to take his chances, nor did he want the violence of a brawl to trigger his brother if Dag had been subjected to any sort of physical attacks, and Dag flinching at the offer of a hug a short while ago told Sören he probably had been. Sören got up, and glared daggers at the

nurse all the way out, throwing an obscene hand gesture behind his back as he walked past the guards.

Anthony was waiting for him, and instead of immediately blindfolding and drugging him and taking him back to the vehicle, Anthony led him down another corridor and into a room where a folding table and several folding steel chairs had been set up. The bald doctor and the agent were waiting for them, with a tray that held a pot of coffee and several bottles of mineral water. Anthony passed Sören a water and he cautiously opened it up and took a sip over the long silence.

Sören was still teary; Anthony produced a travel-size packet of tissues and dabbed at his face. Anthony kept himself composed for the sake of professionalism but Finrod was Finarfin's son and Sören could feel the Finarfin part of Anthony in distress across their bond. Under the table, Sören reached for Anthony's hand.

Sören decided to break the ice. "How is he? *Really.*"

"He lost fourteen kilograms from the last time his weight was recorded by a doctor, in 2020, and he has a vitamin deficiency and an electrolyte imbalance," the doctor said. "We're giving him a special drink for nutrients and weight gain. When he's ready to be discharged we will give you a case of this, enough so that when it runs out, normal food should do the rest."

"And when is he going to be discharged?"

"We want to hold him here an additional five days for observation and... to get his medication stabilized." The doctor took a deep breath. "He's on tranquilizers because of the trauma of his experience, and..."

The agent cut in. "He was also drugged, and he's in withdrawal from those drugs."

"Drugged." Sören didn't like the sound of that.

"From what we've been told, he was made to participate in experiments with his psi ability at least two to three times a month. The rest of the time, he was on drugs that worked to suppress his abilities."

"Who had him?" It came out before Sören could stop himself.

"You know we can't tell you that," the agent said. "It's classified infor-"

Sören fought the urge to throw his drink in her face. "If you're releasing him to me, the chances are non-zero that he's going to have flashbacks and nightmares about the shit he went through, and he's probably going to tell me about some of it. So you might as well fucking tell me who had him, even if you can't tell me everything."

"All right." The agent cleared her throat. "Understand that there will be severe consequences for you if this information becomes public -"

"Not as severe as the consequences will be for you if you don't let me help my fucking brother." Sören grinned. It was not a pleasant grin.

Down, wolf. Anthony rubbed Sören's knee under the table.

"The Russians had him - when we found him. There was a facility at Lake Baikal. He's

been passed around between Russia and the United States, which is why it's been so hard to find him."

"Also why the United States could deny having him when we asked," Anthony said mildly. "They weren't technically lying."

"So... the Russians and the Americans are *working together* on... what?" Sören found himself not surprised that the Americans were involved, the same country that thought waterboarding was an OK thing to do, but he was surprised by the cooperative effort.

"There's been a joint operation since the first Trump administration, a secret alliance between governments, to weaponize people like yourself. It's why Russia helped Trump take power." The agent sat back.

"When you say weaponize..."

"Things like remote viewing, mind control... making accidents happen."

Sören knew Dag had a strong conscience and if he'd been forced to do any of that, especially causing accidents that hurt or killed other people... Sören's fists clenched. He fought the urge to turn over the table and kick the chairs - that wouldn't solve anything, and he didn't want to scare people who were ostensibly on his side. But the rage was white-hot, searing, blinding. Once again he wanted to find whoever did this to Dag and make them pay.

"We have a psychologist who can stay in the area and meet with your brother once a week as needed," the doctor said. "We would also prefer to do medical checkups at least once a month to evaluate his medication - over time, he likely won't need to be on such a high dose of tranquilizers."

"Jesus fucking Christ." Sören put his water down and buried his face in his hands. The reality of the situation was crashing down around him, damming up the flood of relief. Dag was alive, but he was so severely traumatized that living with the horror seemed almost cruel. Sören knew that yes, time could help create distance, but only by so much. For the rest of Dag's life, he was going to be dealing with this... and by taking him home, Sören's new job was caretaker. Sören would do anything for his family, but he knew he was in for a hard time, too.

They all were. Sören thought of Dag's daughters - who had only ever known Sören, Dooku, Maglor and Anthony as their fathers - and how they would react to seeing him this way.

Sören swallowed hard. "Fuck."

"If I may make a suggestion," the doctor said, "he might be better off institutionalized for at least a few months as a stepping stone between captivity and freedom -"

"No. If I was him, that would just make it worse, being freed to be put in a fucking cage all over again. *Fuck. No. Go fuck yourself.*" Sören felt ready to spit.

"Sören," Anthony said under his breath. *I agree with you, but please don't aggravate these people.*

"If he's going to recover, he needs his freedom. He needs something resembling a normal life." Sören shook his head. "I know it's going to be hard these first few months as he re-

adjusts, and the memories are still fresh... but he's my brother. You are not locking *my brother* in an *institution*." Sören slapped the table for emphasis.

The doctor put up a hand. "It was a suggestion, not a demand. We will release him to you in five days, with a treatment plan."

"It won't just be the psychologist and a doctor coming out to see him, but we've asked Anthony to debrief him," the agent said. "We may have some of our other agents come out to meet with him depending upon the information being passed on."

"When you say debrief..." Sören gave Anthony a look of alarm.

"They mean regular normal interviews," Anthony said, "and only if and when he wants to talk about what happened. We have official information from our intel but we'd get even better information straight from the source, someone who was in their program. No, I'm not going to interrogate him or force him to talk."

You better not. Sören normally wouldn't threaten his partner, but this was also a very different circumstance. One that was bringing out Sören's protective urges towards his own blood.

I wouldn't do that to my own child, *Fëanáro*.

"Do you have any other questions?" the doctor asked.

"Am I coming back here to pick him up when it's discharge time?" Sören folded his arms. "Am I gonna have to do the drugs-and-blindfold thing again -"

"No, we'll have an agent bring him directly to your home," the agent said. She looked at Anthony. "Not you, you've done enough traveling."

"Are you very sure?" Anthony cocked his head to one side. "I'd feel safer if -"

"We'd feel safer if you got some rest after an intense mission," the agent said. "Really."

Anthony frowned, but gave a nod.

"If there are no further questions, you're free to go," the agent said, standing up. She put out her hand for Sören to shake. "Thank you for your time."

Sören didn't shake her hand. She'd sat there while that doctor suggested institutionalizing his brother.

After the doctor and the agent left the room, Anthony stood up. He put his satchel on the table and zipped it open. Sören sighed - he knew what was coming.

"I'm sorry," Anthony started again. "I'm sorry. I'm so sorry -"

"Stop apologizing," Sören said. "It's... it's fine. At least I know you can be trusted." Sören glared through the open door even though nobody was immediately in the hallway to glare at. "The sooner I get my brother away from these creeps, the better."

Anthony put some alcohol on a cotton ball and swabbed Sören's bicep. Sören looked away as Anthony prepared the sedative - he wasn't usually squeamish about needles, having almost been a doctor, but something about the conversation he'd just had made

him feel slightly ill - and their eyes locked as Anthony jabbed him.

Once it was done, Anthony took the blindfold and tied it around Sören's eyes. He took a moment to skritch Sören's curls, and pulled Sören against him, into a hug. Strong, reassuring. Safe. His shelter in a storm. Arafinwë had always been that for him. The Force signature wrapped around him - the silver-gold light of the Trees, warmth, the sweetness of spring.

"You don't have to do this alone," Anthony said, his voice cracking from emotion. "I'll help you with him, any way that I can."

Sören patted him. His head started to swim and his lips felt too thick, and he managed to mumble out "thank you".

Anthony scooped him up like he weighed nothing, and Sören leaned into Anthony's touch as Anthony carried him out, just before the world went black.

Chapter 3

"Dad! Dad! Push me higher!"

Sören laughed and got up from the bench where he'd been playing fetch with Huan, and headed over to the swing set where his daughters were playing. May had become June, and it was a mild day, perfect to be outside.

A couple months after Sören, his partners and Ali decided to move from Sydney to Ali's mother's farm in Ceduna, they had made some additions on the property including extra rooms on the houses, a couple of small buildings for a forge and a gym, and a little park-and-playground area. With the playground they had made sure the swings could support adult weights, and the slide was big and sturdy enough for a tall adult to use, so the parents could have fun too. Sören stood behind Kate and pushed her higher into the air, Tori yelled "Me too!" and he gave her a push as well, then he climbed onto one of the empty swings, kicked the ground, pumped his legs, and flew up. As he rose forward, the girls swung back, and as they sailed forward, he was flung back. Tori leaned backwards, hair flowing on the breeze, and she let out a whoop.

That was when Sören saw a black car pulling up to the house. He froze - he didn't recognize the vehicle. He hopped down from the swing. "Stay here," he said, and walked out towards the car, heart pounding, hoping this wasn't trouble. But when the back door opened, Dag stepped out, looking disoriented, and Sören breathed a sigh of relief. He knew that Dag was going to be discharged sometime within the next three days so he felt a little foolish for perceiving the unknown vehicle as a potential threat, but the events of 2020 and 2021 had taught him that he couldn't be too careful.

A man in a black suit with black sunglasses got out of the driver's seat, carrying a green duffel bag of what looked like supplies of some kind, and a clipboard. He kept the pace alongside Dag, and when they got to Sören, the agent handed him the bag and the clipboard.

"The bag contains medication and a couple changes of clothing and there's instructions on the clipboard," the agent said. "We'll have medical staff come by every week on Thursdays to monitor and provide counseling."

Sören was once again relieved and grateful that MI6 had finally gotten some mental health professionals for its paranormal division. Of course, it had come over a decade too late to be of any use to him, his partners, Ali and her children. He tried not to be too bitter as he took the clipboard and the bag. "Thank you," he said.

The agent shook Dag's hand. "Good luck to you."

Dag nodded.

The agent walked back to the black car and Sören and Dag just stood there for a moment, looking at each other. Then Sören let the clipboard and bag fall to the ground and took his brother in his arms, holding him tight. Sören felt the tears come, and he didn't want to make a scene with his kids a few meters away, but he couldn't help crying a little, rocking Dag back and forth. After twelve years, his brother was finally home.

Dag was no longer wearing hospital scrubs - he was in a white T-shirt and jeans. He still looked too skinny, and even more pale than Sören. It broke Sören's heart to see him this

way. But when Sören smiled at him, Dag was actually looking at him rather than off into space, and managed a small smile in return. Sören hugged him even more tightly, sobbing. He tousled Dag's grey hair and patted his back.

The creak of the swing set stopped and Sören heard footsteps. He had told the girls to stay there, but he knew they assumed whatever potential danger there was had passed, and now they were just trying to be polite.

Sören took a step back and put a hand on each of the girls' shoulders. "Dag, this is. Uh." Sören felt a flare of anxiety - they were Dag's biological daughters, not his, even though they were still babies when Dag had been taken prisoner and Sören had been the one to raise them; Sören was the one they acknowledged as their father. They had also been renamed by necessity when the family was relocated and given new aliases. "Kate," he said, patting the black-haired girl's shoulder. "And Tori." He patted the redhaired girl's shoulder. "Kate, Tori, this is... your uncle Dag. My brother."

"Hi," Kate said, smiling sweetly.

"Hello," Tori said, looking a bit more shy.

"Hi." Dag smiled, and then he looked up at Sören with his lips pursed, eyebrows raised. While their Force bond was still blunted - Sören couldn't read his thoughts or emotions like he once used to - Sören still registered the concern; they were going to have to have a few words about custodial arrangements going forward.

"Come on, let's get you inside," Sören said.

In anticipation of Dag's arrival, a room had been prepared in the main house. Sören had gotten some measurements from the staff at The Shop to buy some clothes for Dag - undergarments, socks, jeans and shorts, T-shirts, pajamas - though he knew as Dag gained some weight back he would need new clothes. The room was decorated in navy blue and steel grey, black-finish Scandinavian modern bedframe and dressers, a small desk and chair. A flowering *Lawrenzia helmsii* grew in a ceramic bowl Sören had made of banded blues and browns, and Sören had framed a print of Monet's "Water Lilies" to try to brighten the room up a bit.

Sören set the duffel bag down on the bed, zipped it open, and got out the clothing to add to Dag's collection in the closet. "There's underwear, socks and pajamas in the dressers," Sören explained as he put a T-shirt on the hanger. "If you need more covers, or less heavy ones, I'll show you where they are in the hall closet."

After he hung up the clothes he took the bag and led Dag down to the hall closet, then pointed him in the direction of the bathroom. "Shower runs a bit hot. The orange toothbrush is yours."

Dooku and Ali's mother Medika came out of the kitchen, where Sören had been helping them with dinner preparations. Kate and Tori hung back with their brother.

"Dagnýr." Dooku attempted a smile; Sören could sense the awkward tension in him, not knowing how to react or what to say after the ordeal Dag had been through. "It is good to see you again."

"Auntie, this is Dag. Dag, this is your aunt Medika," Sören said. Then he gestured to his son, a small carbon copy of himself with a halo of dark curls and solemn brown eyes. "And this is my son, Søren. Søren, this is your uncle Dag, my brother."

"I didn't know you had a brother," Søren said.

"Jæja, I... never talked about him because..." Søren scratched his beard and ran a nervous hand through his curls. "Bad stuff happened, and we didn't know if he was alive or dead, and we're not supposed to say the names of dead people." There were enough Aboriginals in the family that even the non-Aboriginals kept the custom of not speaking the names of the dead. What Søren didn't add to his statement was that even if he'd known his brother wasn't dead, the captivity was such a sore subject that Søren couldn't talk about it without falling apart, and he didn't want his kids to see their father having meltdowns.

"Hi Uncle Dag," Søren said politely.

"Hello," Medika said. "Welcome home."

"Thank you." Dag gave a small smile and shifted his weight awkwardly. Then his nose twitched. "Something smells good."

"We're roasting chicken and there will be several sides to go with it," Dooku said. "Ali and the others are in town running a few errands and will come back with dessert."

"Others?" Dag looked a bit nervous.

"Ali, Maglor, Anthony, Ali's brother Darren, Ali's kids Metallica and Megadeth." Søren's lips quirked, knowing how the names must sound to outsiders. "They're getting animal feed and some other stuff." Even though the sheep grazed, they still ate a commercial grain mix to supplement their diet...

...and then there was the case of pig feed for Gullinbursti, the enormous immortal golden boar that Søren had adopted after a battle against the Norse gods in 2021. Gullinbursti ate table scraps, but he also went through a lot of feed, to the point where it felt like they were buying more feed for the boar than food for the entire family. Søren glanced out the window at the very large and luxurious pen that had been built past the sheep fields; that was also going to take some explaining to Dag.

And the ravens, wherever they were. Søren closed his eyes and got the mental image of Huginn and Muninn flying in Paris, watching another world's version of Søren and Anthony having coffee at an outside cafe.

When he opened his eyes again, he gestured to his brother. "Let's find something to watch," he said, leading the way to the living room. It felt a bit banal to turn to the TV in a time like this, but it was the first step at bringing Dag back to something like a normal life.

—

Søren was a light sleeper by virtue of trauma and raising three children, but it wasn't noise that roused him out of sleep in the middle of the night. He felt a disturbance in the Force - like somebody in the family was in distress. His partners were sleeping more or less soundly, and after checking on his son and daughters and the cats, Søren wondered if it was somebody in the other house. Then he saw a figure moving around outside.

Søren stepped out and saw Dag in his pajamas with a flashlight, walking around. Dag had

taken his nighttime medication right in front of Sören, so Sören didn't understand why Dag was awake, but then he knew medicine didn't always work as intended on Force sensitives, and the first night in a new place, no matter how safe, could make it difficult to sleep.

"You OK, Dag?" Sören asked.

"Oh... yeah, I guess." Dag stopped pacing and gave Sören a nervous, guilty smile. "I had to wake up to piss and then I couldn't get back to sleep."

"It happens. You want me to make you some chamomile tea or something?"

"I don't want to trouble you -"

"It's no trouble."

Dag followed Sören inside and sat on the couch while Sören made a cup of chamomile tea for his brother. The cats circled but were still wary of the new person, keeping a distance. After Sören brought the tea to Dag he sat in the armchair and Pumpkin immediately hopped onto Sören's lap, purring loudly.

Dag sipped his tea in silence for a moment and Sören stroked the cat. Usually a cat purring on his lap was relaxing, but Sören felt anxious - it was his brother but it had been so long, with so many things happening in Dag's absence, that it might as well be a stranger. He didn't know what to say, where to begin, how to break the ice.

Dag went first. "It's 2032, right?"

"Right. It's June now."

Dag nodded. "And we were born in... eighty-four?"

"Jæja."

Dag raised an eyebrow. "Forgive me for asking, but... did you have some work done?"

Sören snorted. Then he felt a twinge of concern - Dag had been there back in 2019 at Margrét's wedding party, which had turned into a reveal of who and what they had once been, and Ingmar - Ingwion, also known as Freyr - had offered immortality to those who had been reborn as mortal. Dag knew that Sören had taken the offer; Dag himself had not. Sören knew that memory loss with trauma wasn't uncommon but it seemed odd for Dag to not remember something this significant.

"I haven't had any work done, Dag. Do you remember Ingmar at all? You met him at our sister's wedding. He's Ingwion from Tolkien... he became the Norse god Freyr when he lived among humans. He made me immortal. I don't age anymore, I stopped aging just before I turned thirty-five."

"And... Nicolae? Dooku? I never know what to call him."

"He doesn't age anymore either." Sören decided not to bring up how he, himself, had made Anthony immortal when Anthony had almost died in a Balrog attack.

Dag sat and finished his tea, seeming to be taking this all in, contemplating. Sören wondered if he had anything else to say about it. What came next floored him. "You

should find Ingwion again, we should go to Asgard and... ask him to do whatever he did for you, to me. I -"

"Dag, no." Sören put up a hand.

He couldn't believe Dag was asking this - after the trauma of being held captive and experimented on for a decade, and god knows whatever else had happened, immortality would be the last thing Sören would ask for if their situations were reversed, not wanting to live with that sort of trauma for eternity; the trauma Sören already had was bad enough. Sören wondered if Dag was under the impression that immortality would heal his body and by extension his mind, as a quick cure for trauma - he and Anthony could attest that it didn't work that way; Anthony still had nightmares about the Balrogs - or perhaps Dag was afraid of being recaptured and thought immortality might make him more immune to what had been done to him. Perhaps Dag felt guilty about being away from the family for so long and didn't want to re-traumatize Sören with the eventuality of his death.

Whatever the reason, Sören didn't think it was feasible. "First of all, Ingwion's... gone."

"Gone how?"

Dag seemed almost concerned, which again struck Sören as odd - they hadn't gotten to know each other well enough at the wedding party to become friends, and Sören hadn't known Ingwion to have any other contact with him.

"He was never on our side," Sören said mildly. "We went to Asgard in 2021 and had a showdown with the gods, after what they did to our family, it was overdue. Very few of them survived."

"So you... you actually made the Ragnarök happen."

Sören just nodded.

"You killed gods." Dag sounded incredulous.

"Yes, Dag, that's what 'very few of them survived' means." Sören felt a little annoyed that Dag seemed a bit disbelieving, but then he knew Dag had been a scientist, an atheist, a skeptic - though he believed in aliens, and parallel universes - and even after having met gods in the flesh, it was still hard for Dag to reconcile that with his scientific conditioning, let alone the claim that mere humans had killed gods. Of course, they weren't mere humans, and Sören less so - the Flame Imperishable had been quickening inside him.

Dag's mouth opened, then he closed it. He put his cup down on the coffee table and leaned back. The "I can see forever" look from the hospital was back on his face.

"I'm sorry," Sören said, feeling self-conscious. "I'm sure this wasn't the conversation you wanted to have when you first got back to your family."

Dag shrugged. "Don't really know what other conversations we could have. I asked you about your appearance, you gave an honest answer."

Sören sighed and looked down. He decided to be honest again, going against his original plan to not tell Dag about Anthony's immortality - Dag would figure it out sooner or later, and better Dag hear it from him. "Second of all, I can... I can do it - Anthony's immortal too, because of me - but I'm not doing it for you when you're fresh out of being held prisoner for twelve years and still... not OK, not yourself. It's a difficult decision to make,

there are no takebacks, and even if you think you want it right now, you don't know what the world is going to be like in five, ten, twenty, a hundred, two hundred years. You're not in a position to make that decision right now, you probably won't be for some time."

"OK." Dag looked off to the side. For all of his vehemence that they go to Asgard and find Ingwion, he seemed to have let go of the notion of immortality pretty quickly. Sören hoped he'd knocked some sense into Dag. *Or maybe he thinks my gift is inferior compared to Freyr's, like Discount Immortality.* The idea seemed absurd.

Sören felt a prickle of apprehension, not wanting to have this discussion, but it had to happen sometime and they might as well get it out of the way now. "That leads me to the next 'not in a position to' thing. I haven't told the girls you're really their father. That doesn't mean I won't, eventually, but -"

"But it would cause complications until you think I'm ready to... be their father again."

Sören nodded. "And I don't know when that would be."

"Or if." Dag looked off to the side again and then he met Sören's eyes. "I don't think I can handle that kind of responsibility for a long time. I'm not trying to be a deadbeat -"

"No, I get it. If you were paralyzed and needed a housekeeper, nobody would think you were trying to pawn off responsibilities to other people. It's... it's a similar thing at work here. If and when you feel ready, we can talk to your therapist, and to the girls, and work out a custodial arrangement. Till then..."

"I'm Uncle Dag. It's OK. I get it."

Sören exhaled. He was relieved Dag wasn't putting up a fight about it - he really didn't want to have to treat Dag like he was incompetent - but it still bothered him, one more thing on the list of injustices done to Dag... done to their whole family. Sören would gladly kill the gods all over again for their assistance in getting Dag captured, their assistance in the Balrog attack which left Ali's kids without a father, had left little Sören without a mother. And yet that wouldn't undo what happened, what they had to live with. Sören hated that Dag would just have to be Uncle Dag on the sidelines with his own blood children, for the foreseeable future, all because of something that should have never happened.

Sören put Pumpkin down on the floor, got up from the armchair, sat next to Dag on the couch, pulled him close and held him tight, rocking him. "I'm sorry," Sören whispered. He began to weep, heart breaking for his brother all over again, while Dag was silent, numb. Sören had tears enough for both of them. "I'm sorry, Dag. I'm sorry. I'm so sorry."

After awhile Sören realized that if he didn't want his kids to see him like this, not wanting to upset them or burden them and make them feel like they had to take care of their father, he probably shouldn't subject Dag to his tears for the same reason. Sören quickly pulled himself together - though he still felt fragile, ready to start crying again any minute - and led Dag back to the main house. He tucked Dag into bed and gently rubbed his shoulder till he was sure Dag had fallen back asleep, then he took the flashlight and walked over to the other house. When he got in, Anthony was waiting for him on the couch.

"I didn't mean to wake you up," Sören said.

"It's all right." Anthony held out his arms. "Here."

Sören went to him and in the shield wall of Anthony's embrace, he let himself fall apart again. Anthony pet him, kissed his brow, kissed his tears, made soothing noises. "It's all right, love."

"I hate seeing him like this. I hate what they did to him."

"I know."

"I hate that it took twelve fucking years to find him." Sören snuffled. "I killed gods, we have ravens who can see into other worlds, I couldn't find my brother, couldn't save my brother -"

"Shhhh. That's not your fault, and you know it."

"I hate feeling so fucking *powerless*, Anthony." It was like the Balrog attacks all over again. "I can't fix this. I don't even know how to begin to fix this."

"We pick up the broken pieces and assemble what we can, one piece at a time. That's all we can do. We're already doing it, *you're* already doing it."

"It doesn't feel like I'm doing enough." Sören sobbed into Anthony's shoulder. "I hate this so much."

"One step at a time, one day at a time." Anthony skritch'd Sören's curls and beard like he was one of the cats. He picked up Sören's chin, booped his nose, and kissed the tip. "I love you, and I love your sensitive, beautiful heart." His hand slid down to rest on Sören's heart; Sören felt the Force tingling in his touch. "I love you for wanting to help your brother. But you need to stop beating yourself up for what you can't do."

"It's another fucking reminder of how I failed. I couldn't save Frankie." After eleven years, he spoke the name aloud - there weren't any Aboriginals in the room. "I almost lost you. And back then... all my sons died, but Maglor. We died. It's like the cycle of death and destruction is doomed to repeat itself."

"We are here together to fight the Doom." Anthony's eyes locked with his. "You're not telling me to go away again a second time, either."

Sören remembered when he, as Fëanor, told Finarfin to go back to Aman and pretend to repent, to save himself and his children. Sören touched Anthony's cheek, melting to those green eyes. "I need you."

"I need you too." Anthony leaned in and stole a kiss. What was meant to be a gentle, sweet little kiss quickly heated, their tongues playing together; they both groaned into the kiss. Sören felt the fire rising between them, the ancient call of their blood.

Anthony picked Sören up off the couch and began carrying him down towards the bedroom. "You need to get some rest."

"Is that what we're calling it now."

Anthony rolled his eyes, chuckled, then gave Sören a stern look. "I mean actual rest. You're exhausted from all of this. I can feel it. We can do *that* after you've gotten some damn sleep."

Sören stuck his tongue out, but didn't argue with him about it. As if on cue, Sören yawned - he was a lot more tired than he'd realized.

Snuggled into Anthony's chest, listening to his heartbeat, soothed by his tender touch petting his hair and back, Sören started to drift off. He still had that nagging feeling that he shouldn't sleep - hypervigilant, feeling like he'd left a job undone, like he should keep vigil at his brother's side - but soon that feeling rolled away, and all that remained was the safety of his lover's arms, the feeling of trust, the promise of loyalty, not having to do any of this alone.

"I love you," Sören heard himself mumble before sleep pulled him under.

Chapter 4

Sören felt Anthony's touch in the Force before he heard the forge door open, and before Anthony walked in. Anthony sat on the bench and waited, watching Sören hammer hot steel on the anvil, beating it, taming it. It was July now, and Sören's son Sören's birthday was coming up on the twenty-third. He would be eleven this year, and Sören felt he was the right age to begin to learn how to fight with a sword. Junior was bookish and artistically inclined and a bit physically awkward, just like Sören had been at that age, and Sören didn't want to push him *too* hard - like Einar had made Sören participate in sports when he was ill-suited for it - but Sören also felt the art of fencing would be fun for his son, and a good way to develop self-confidence.

There was, of course, an even more practical reason. A darker one. Odin might be gone, but the Valar were still out there. So was Morgoth. Sören knew that an eleven-year-old fighting with a blunt sword didn't stand a chance against a god, but fighting skills might mean the difference between life and death at the hands of a Balrog - like the one that had taken the boy's mother - so the time to start learning to defend himself was now. And Sören hated that, feeling like it was taking his son's innocence... but he would try to keep the need for defense training balanced with light-hearted fun, while he could.

If he could.

Sören pounded harder, like he was personally smashing in the heads of the Balrogs that had ambushed his family eleven years ago, but of course they were gone and he was here with scars on his soul that still ripped open. Anthony watched quietly, patiently, with love in his eyes, and Sören could feel Anthony's concern and compassion, knowing Anthony knew. Even though he had killed gods, Sören still felt powerless about so much in his life - he was really feeling the weight of it now, with Dag returned, traumatized - and the forge was where he could be master. Where he could beat steel into submission, shape glass as he had not been able to shape fate.

The hammer rang out, and out, and out, sparks flying. The bench was a safe enough distance away Anthony wouldn't get singed, and now Sören could feel the awe across their Force bond, Anthony admiring him as if he were some sort of smithing god made flesh.

When the steel was beaten to his satisfaction, Sören pulled his goggles up, wiped the sweat from his brow, and walked over to Anthony.

"Hey."

"Hey." Anthony gestured to the anvil. "How goes it?"

Sören nodded. "It goes." Sören looked at the clock and cringed - he'd been in here all day. It was time to rejoin the land of the living. He quenched the steel in a brine solution, then took off his gloves. "Let's get some air, já?"

The sun was just beginning to set, streaks of gold and pink across a deepening blue. Even after eleven years in Australia it was still surreal to him that it was wintertime in July, getting dark earlier and light later, especially with the contrast of the midnight sun in Iceland. Sören realized Anthony had gotten him for dinner - Sören's stomach growled as if on cue, he hadn't eaten yet today, even though he made sure his own kids ate regular meals. As they walked across the field from the forge towards the larger house, Sören

saw Dag walking with Maglor - Maglor was walking Huan - and waved across the field. Then he remembered Anthony had planned on taking Dag shopping today in preparation for Junior's birthday.

"How did the shopping trip go?" Sören said.

Anthony nodded. "It was fine. Uneventful. He managed to stay calm in the store, even though I imagine plazas must be difficult considering that's where he was taken. On a different continent, of course, but still."

"But still." Sören knew how trauma worked, having his own.

"Little steps towards normalcy. Trying to show him the world isn't a big bad scary place." Anthony gave a tight smile. "I keep trying to show myself that, too, but my brain isn't entirely convinced."

Anthony had PTSD from his time in the Gulf as well as the Balrog attack, which almost killed him - would have killed him if Sören hadn't intervened. Sören paused and put an arm around him, and Anthony sighed, leaning on Sören. Then Anthony pulled Sören into a hug and they stood there, clinging.

"It's also good that you're, you know, spending time with him," Sören said, glancing out where Dag and Maglor were walking in the distance.

"Yeah. Although... it's difficult. He doesn't talk much, and I'm not great with people on a personal level. It was one thing when I was in the service and we had a job to get done and things were neat and orderly. One-on-one, I'm Mr. Awkward."

"Well, I mean, Dag is a scientist, so I'm sure he gets that."

"Perhaps. But it's... I don't know. I clicked with you and the family right away but with Dag it's harder to thaw and warm up, on both sides. I know on his end it's trauma, I'm still this weird stranger and he knows I work for the government and I don't exactly blame him for any wariness because of that, but I feel... kind of wary myself? And I'm not sure why." Anthony took a step back and looked into Sören's eyes. "I mean, that's my son." He put his hand on his heart, speaking of Finarfin and Finrod. "I hate that I'm feeling like this, like _"

"Maybe you have expectations of what the big reunion with your son is supposed to look like, and the reality of it is different, and you should let go of whatever Hollywood, fairytale preconceived notions and just let things evolve naturally. He might have been your son back then, but in this life you're you and he's him and it's understandable that you're not necessarily going to have automatic father-son bonding with someone only four, five years younger than you."

"Hmm," Anthony said, looking out at Dag and back at Sören. "Maybe. I don't think it's that though. I don't really know how to explain it. I think it's just my social awkwardness being... awkward."

"Like I said, he probably gets it. Just... give it time. Keep trying. He needs it, and so do you."

Anthony nodded. Then he glanced out at Dag again and this time his eyes narrowed and his brow furrowed, like he was seeing something concerning, and he let out another "hmm."

"What?"

Anthony pointed in the sky. A drone was hovering in the air several meters above Gullinbursti's pen, and resumed flying over the fields.

Sören's jaw dropped. "What in the actual fuck."

They knew that MI6 sent regular drones to do surveillance on them, in addition to Anthony regularly giving reports to the home office. However, they tended to find dead drones on the side of the road when they went to town. MI6 still kept sending them, but it had become something of a running joke in the family, with Maglor singing "Another One Bites The Dust" when he found yet another broken-down drone. When Ali and Darren and their siblings were children, Medika had a shaman come out and put wards on the property, and one of the things the family had noticed was that devices behaved strangely - cell reception and Internet was spotty, Anthony's watch regularly stopped working and needed new batteries. But the wards had been specifically to drive away evil, and of course, it seemed like the drones were the casualty of that, since Medika and her late husband Böðvar distrusted the Commonwealth.

Now here was a drone, that had actually made it onto their property and was flying around taking pictures, completely unaffected by the wards. No other drone had survived this far.

Anthony frowned, but said nothing. He continued leading Sören towards the house.

They had a fuller house than usual - Darren had joint custody of his three kids, and they were visiting through the beginning of next month.

Metallica and Megadeth, Ali's children with her late partner Kenny, were seventeen now, turning eighteen in December. Darren's kids Brian, Stacey and William were sixteen, fourteen, and thirteen respectively. Kate and Tori were twelve, and Sören would be eleven soon. The youngest was Maglor and Ali's daughter Elanora, who was almost nine. Renovations had been made for a bigger dining area, and the kids sat at the kids' table, except for Metallica and Megadeth, who were now eating with the adults. Metallica, like her mother and grandmother, was keenly observant, giving Sören and Anthony concerned looks through dinner. As they were finishing up the last few bites of food, Metallica finally leaned in, lowered her voice, and asked Sören, "What is it, Uncle?" Even though Ali was Sören's cousin and not his sister, Ali and Sören were as close as siblings - Darren had become a close friend also, so Ali and Darren's children had taken to calling Sören "Uncle", and Sören's kids called Ali "Auntie" and Darren "Uncle" as well.

"Oh. It's... nothing." Sören gave an awkward smile and shifted uncomfortably in his seat, not knowing how to discuss the significance of a non-dead drone flying around the fields.

Metallica scowled and raised an eyebrow. "It's not nothing."

Ali put her fork down and gave Sören a look. "Well, out with it."

"There was a drone," Anthony said, keeping his voice down, even though the kids' table was loud - Junior, Brian and Will were having a burping contest while Stacey rolled her eyes and Kate and Tori giggled, and now Elanora let out the loudest burp, looking proud of herself.

Maglor pinched the bridge of his nose.

"Oh, another dead drone? We ought to think about scrapping them, seeing if anyone in town needs the metal," Medika said.

"No. This one wasn't dead. It was performing surveillance exactly as it was intended to do."

Dooku's eyebrows shot up, and Maglor blinked. Medika froze, and Ali pursed her lips. Darren leaned back and folded his arms. Dag had no reaction, but then he hadn't been told about why this was noteworthy. Sören nodded and added to Anthony's statement. "I saw it. I was there."

They waited until after dinner to continue the conversation. Once the dishes were cleared and washed, the kids dragged Dag outside for a game of football, except for Metallica, who had piano practice, and Elanora, who wanted to practice on her drums; Metallica led Elanora out to the little studio that Maglor had built, leaving the grownups to sit in the living room with tea.

Sören sat on Dooku's lap - they'd been together for fifteen years now, they'd learned each other very well, and Dooku knew Sören needed the comforting reassurance from his father figure. Sören knew it was comforting to Dooku as well. He leaned back against Dooku's chest and snuggled into the strong arms holding him tight.

Daddy's here, Dooku spoke into his mind, across their Force bond. They were very careful not to let their daddy/boy roleplaying slip in front of the kids, not wanting them to get the wrong idea and make things uncomfortable for everyone. Dooku tousled Sören's curls and kissed the top of my head. He spoke aloud then, leading the discussion. "If the drone was still functional that strongly implies the wards are not."

Medika nodded slowly. "It's been a long time since the wards were tuned up. Long enough that the guy who did it isn't alive anymore."

Ali frowned a little, and cocked her head to one side. "Is there anyone else who can do it since... that guy... isn't around?"

"Yeh, there is." Medika put her tea down, folded her hands and looked down at the floor. Looking pensive. When she looked back up she was also frowning. "Nat." Nat was Medika's mother's brother and oldest living relative.

"Nat." Darren's eyes widened. "Crazy Uncle Nat, who's been in and out of psych hospitals -"

"Yes, *that* Nat. The reason he'd been in hospital was because he accidentally traveled across universes with the portal," Medika said. "And... it's because he's been to other worlds, that the elders decided he was to replace our holy man. To train up and learn the ceremonies proper."

"So I guess one of us should give Nat a ring," Ali said.

"I'll do it," Medika said. "First thing tomorrow, I'll call him and with any luck he'll be available sometime within the next few days. The sooner we get the wards working again, the better."

"I agree." Sören scowled, looking out the window, watching Dag kick a soccer ball, smiling and laughing - not quite his old pre-captivity self, but making progress, healing little by little. "I know it isn't just MI6 watching us... but probably Sauron or Morgoth is observing,

and the longer our wards are down, the worse that looks. They took the opportunity for almost all of us to be outside the wards for -"

Maglor put up a hand, and Sören left off of mentioning the Balrog attack. "We can set watches, rotating shifts until Nat is able to come out and do his thing. I'll stay up tonight."

"I'll stay up with you," Darren said. "Strength in numbers."

"Yeah," Anthony said. "I'll volunteer for the night shift." Sensing Sören's distress across their Force bond - Sören's mind's eye was replaying the Balrog attack yet again - Anthony glanced over, rubbed Sören's knee, and said, "We weren't expecting them then. We're on alert now. We're prepared. That makes a difference."

"There's also more of us now," Darren pointed out. "Metallica and Megadeth are almost adults. Bri and Will and Stacey are pretty tough too. Especially Bri." Darren smiled; Brian was following in his father's footsteps with javelin throwing - he was going to try for the Olympics in 2036.

Sören sighed. More of them wouldn't mean anything if they were outnumbered, but Sören wasn't going to argue with them or try to be the voice of doom. He just knew he wasn't going to sleep well tonight. "Might as well have four bodies on the watch."

"As you know, you have been in the forge since before dawn," Dooku scolded. "You should rest."

Sören gave a bitter laugh. "Like I can rest under these... never mind." Again, he wasn't going to try to argue. But he did double down, looking over his shoulder to scowl at Dooku. "I'd feel better if there was a fourth person -"

"I'll do it," Ali said. "You heard your man there. You're going to get some bloody sleep."

Anthony tried not to smile; Maglor didn't even try, chuckling a little. Sören stuck out his tongue at Ali, who stuck out hers in return.

It still feels weird when you try to parent me, Maitimo, Sören spoke into Ali's mind.

Ali snorted. *Consider it payback.*

—

Nat insisted on coming immediately once Medika phoned him and gave him the news - Nat considered the matter serious, the longer the wards were down the more they were at risk. Maglor drove out to pick up Nat and bring him to the ranch, and Nat got to work right away.

None of the non-Aboriginal members of the family were allowed to watch the ritual - Sören had been in the forge again since dawn anyway, getting the news from Maglor on his way out to get Nat. Despite Dooku's and Ali's lecturing him on sleep, Sören was stressed out enough from knowing the wards weren't working, and what potentially could happen, that his sleep had been very light, and only for a few hours. So he returned to work on his son's practice sword, re-heating and beating the metal, getting it ever closer to the finished product, his mind's eye burning with visions of what it would look like.

Even though Sören wasn't watching the ritual, he could still feel the power of it, like an explosion going off in the fields, shaking the walls of the forge, then his ears were making little pops of pressure like he was in a plane climbing higher. His hair stood on end and his arms broke out in gooseflesh despite the heat of the forge; a shiver went down his spine and his breath hitched, head ringing. He had to sit down for a moment and after he sat, it felt like a wave rippled through the forge. Vibrating, tingling, everything pins and needles, then a field of sparking static.

When the strange sensation passed, Sören involuntarily flexed his fingers and toes and felt himself sigh. He got up and got back to work, and now as he resumed work on the sword he felt relief, the stress rolling out of his body with each swing of the hammer. He knew it wasn't just the endorphin rush of working on a project, but it was as if the air had changed, the hovering sense of doom from the exposed wards was going away now that they were safe again.

He was able to concentrate more fully on lining up his vision of the fully realized sword with the steps to get there, losing himself as he often did when he was painting or sculpting, now that same trance-like state was there in the forge. He was so lost in his work that it took the sound of a clearing throat to snap him back to reality - Sören almost dropped his hammer. He set it down on the anvil and looked to see he had a guest.

Sören had only seen Nat a handful of times over the last eleven years - Nat was a recluse - but it was unmistakably him. Nat was just a few inches over five feet tall, wizened with a shock of fuzzy grey hair and broad features smiling in caramel skin sprinkled with dark freckles on his cheeks. Kind but sad dark brown eyes. Nat leaned on a walking stick, and when Sören made the "come in" gesture Nat hobbled in slowly, the walk of someone with arthritis in one knee, favoring the other side.

"Hi, Uncle Nat," Sören said - he'd been instructed to call him "Uncle" too as a show of respect.

"Hello, Sören."

"Thank you for coming out and, ah. Warding the ranch." Sören ran a nervous hand through his curls, then put his hand out. Nat shook Sören's hand, his grip surprisingly firm despite his frailty, and Sören watched as Nat's other hand went to the pocket of his jeans.

"I have something for you," Nat said.

Sören braced himself. He'd always felt a little awkward around Nat since their first meeting when Nat said he'd met another version of Sören in a universe that was in the 1940s - like different universes ran on different times, some ahead, some behind - and that version of Sören had helped him get home, finding the right universe. It wasn't Nat's fault, and Sören felt guilty for being slightly uncomfortable with him, but he was afraid of hearing more about that other version of himself.

And Sören knew why he was afraid. The part of him that was still Fëanor - indeed it wasn't just a part anymore, Sören was feeling more and more like Fëanor all the time - was insatiably curious. Sören didn't want to fall down the rabbit hole of wanting to know about other universes.

Wanting to see them for himself. Wanting to prove Dag's theory, for himself.

Nat pulled a small, flat pebble roughly the size of a quarter from his pocket. It was a greyish-brown, flecked with white. He handed the stone to Sören, which was smooth and

cool to the touch.

"What's this?" Sören asked, feeling a little hesitant even as his fingers curled around the gift.

"It's a stone from the world where you and I met. I've been hanging onto it all this time, but I felt like you should have it. Like you're meant to have this for some reason. I don't know why. I just know that it belongs to you."

Their eyes met, and held. Then the stone seemed to pulse in his fingers, much like the Silmarils did. Part of Sören wanted to drop the stone like it was a hot potato, but he found himself gripping it that much tighter. His heart skipped a beat and his mouth went dry. He nodded and managed a, "thank you."

"You're welcome. Are you coming for tea and biscuits?"

It was such a casual, normal thing to ask right after giving a stone that had traveled across entire universes, that Sören couldn't help laughing a little. Nat laughed too, seeming to also find the normalcy juxtaposed with the weirdness to be quite funny.

Nat watched as Sören put the sword back in the brine solution, and Sören followed him out of the forge across the field to the big house. They walked slowly enough for Nat's sake that it was a nice scenic walk, the sheep bleating in the distance, Gullinbursti snorting happily into his trough, under a clear blue sky.

Sören put the stone in his pocket but as he took the break for tea and cookies, he found himself reaching for the stone over and over again, as if to assure himself it was real somehow, a response that made no sense to him. Sören decided to come along on the trip to drive Nat back home, car window rolled down, feeling the breeze on his face, trying to further unwind after last night's restlessness, so maybe he could get better sleep tonight.

And yet, his mind couldn't completely slow down. Sören took out the stone and looked at it. It was just an ordinary stone, it felt like any old normal stone...

...but it was not. Sören was holding a piece of the puzzle, somehow. He thought again of Nat's words. *I felt like you should have it. Like you're meant to have this for some reason. I don't know why. I just know that it belongs to you.*

Usually when Sören worked on a project he had a very clear, very persistent mental image of what it was supposed to be, like the creation already existed and he was shaping it into being, birthing it in a way. This was different. Now Sören felt almost like he was listening to the stone that had traveled across universes, asking it why it came to him. What the stone wanted to be.

And on the way back to Ceduna, the answer was a vague vision, peripheral, more like a feeling than a vision. *If I melt this down and combine it with glass from one of the palantiri, I can see into other universes. I might even be able to use this as a mini-portal to travel, without having to go to one of the larger portals like Uluru. And since it would have a piece from this universe, with the palantir, it would serve as an anchor to help me get home, not get lost.*

That thought scared him a little, and once again Sören tried to push it away, not wanting to give into Fëanor's curiosity. But... there were practical reasons for a mini-portal. Like an emergency. Sören's mind's eye once again replayed the Balrog attack of 2021. Frankie,

Kenny and his uncle might all still be here if they had been able to jump through a gate into another world, then jump back into this one in a different place. The wards were up at the ranch, so they were in less danger than they had been for those fraught hours knowing the wards were down - wondering who else knew - but of course the Balrog attack had happened away from the ranch, and they had learned from that experience never to all be gone at once, to only go on outings a few at a time. It wasn't the worst thing in the world, but it still felt a bit stifling... and even with going out a few at a time, there was the unspoken worry that Sauron and Morgoth would be more than happy to expend resources to attack just a few.

His idea wasn't a cure-all, but Sören would worry a little less if he could create a mini-portal and use it as an emergency exit under attack. He nodded to himself, thumb rubbing the stone. That had to be the reason why Nat felt it belonged to him. He was going to make a new invention, one the Fëanor part of him was already proud of.

To go boldly, Sören thought to himself and leaned back in his seat, closing his eyes, finally dozing off for a nap.

Chapter 5

Not long after Junior's eleventh birthday, Elanora had her ninth birthday on August sixth. Sören had been working on a very special gift - with Sören's help, since he and Elanora were very close - and they had managed to finish a couple of days before, which was enough time to allow the paint to dry. The afternoon of Elanora's birthday, Sören followed his father out to the forge to collect the gift, and they walked together to Maglor's music studio, where they could hear Elanora pounding on the drums while Maglor played "Voodoo Child (Slight Return)" on guitar.

Sören couldn't help smiling at the sight of Maglor rocking out with his daughter. Maglor was wearing a Pink Floyd shirt and ripped jeans, playing a blue Fender Stratocaster that had the Star of Fëanor painted on it, and Elanora was wearing an AC/DC shirt with black cargo pants... and a rhinestone-studded crown that said Birthday Princess. Elanora was beaming as bright as the sun, her joy in the art of the drum infectious.

They had come just in time for the vocals, and Elanora gestured with her drumstick to say "come here"; Maglor nodded approval. Sören walked in, picked up the mic and began to sing:

*Well, I stand up next to a mountain
And I chop it down with the edge of my hand
Well, I stand up next to a mountain
And I chop it down with the edge of my hand
Well, I pick up all the pieces and make an island
Might even raise a little sand*

*Because I'm a voodoo child
Lord knows I'm a voodoo child, baby*

Maglor's guitar wailed, and Elanora banged the drums harder, keeping good time. Maglor looked over his shoulder to grin at his daughter and Sören felt a tight ache in his chest, tears brimming his eyes, so happy that Maglor seemed to have found peace after all these thousands of years. His voice shook a little when the guitar solo ended and he sang the next part:

*I want to say one more last thing
I didn't mean to take up all your sweet time
I'll give it right back to ya one of these days
I said, I didn't mean to take up all your sweet time
I'll give it right back one of these days, oh yeah
If I don't meet you no more in this world
Then I'll meet you in the next one
And don't be late*

Sören thought of the mini-portal pulsing in one of his cargo pants pockets, against his knee - he hadn't used it for himself yet. Just yet. He hadn't even told anyone about it yet, but he carried it with him everywhere to ensure it wouldn't be lost or end up in the wrong hands. He was looking for the right window of opportunity to mention his invention, and test it out on people with a few volunteers. His heart beat a little faster, remembering Dag's TED Talk from 2019.

Why fly, when you can just walk through a door?

When the song was over, Søren jumped up and down, clapping. Elanora stood up to take a bow and Søren put his fingers in his mouth and whistled.

"You did a great job," Søren told Elanora sincerely. He knew he shouldn't be too surprised Maglor's daughter was so talented, but nonetheless, it was mind-blowing.

"I wanna do another Jimi song," Elanora said. "But this time I want to do guitar and you do drums, Dad." Elanora turned to Maglor. "I know I'm not as good as Jimi -"

"Nobody's as good as Jimi," Maglor said with a smile. "But that doesn't mean you can't or shouldn't practice." Maglor held out his guitar.

Søren and Søren looked at each other - that was their cue to give Elanora her gift. "Wait," Søren called out, and ran over to where they'd set the gift just outside the studio door.

Elanora's grey eyes were as big as saucers as Søren carried in what he and his father had been working on - they had custom-painted the body of a Fender Stratocaster to resemble "Starry Night", but with the sky swirling in psychedelic rainbow colors... and Hells the Unicorn was flying and farting a rainbow.

"Hells," Maglor said when he looked at the farting unicorn.

Søren grinned; he still couldn't resist ribbing Maglor about the stuffed Build-A-Bear unicorn he'd given him back in 2021. "Exactl -"

"EE," Elanora screamed, taking the guitar and hugging it. "I LOVE IT, OH MY GOD, I LOVE IT SO MUCH, THANK YOU THANK YOU THANK YOUUUUUU..."

She strapped on the guitar and then she gave Søren a big squeezy hug, then threw her arms around Søren's waist and hugged him tight. Søren laughed and tousled her wavy black hair, pleased that she was so enthusiastic about her gift; he and his son had worked very hard painting it, to get every little detail just right. Søren grinned at his son and Junior's face lit up - Søren liked that Junior enjoyed art so much and took pride in his work. *A chip off the old block.* Søren sighed. *Just like before.*

"You guys did amazing work," Maglor said, coming closer to inspect the painted guitar.

"He helped," Søren said, putting an arm around his son.

"As you know..." Maglor smiled, and ruffled Junior's curls. "A lot of love went into that."

"We wanted to give her something really special, something unique, something nobody else in the world has," Junior said. "I'm glad you like it."

"I LOVE IT," Elanora bellowed.

"GOOD," Junior yelled back.

"I'm gonna tune my guitar and then I can break this in, we can play another song?" Elanora asked, and Maglor nodded. Once the guitar was ready, Elanora pointed at the amp and told her father, "Turn it up."

Maglor laughed and saluted as he walked over. "How high?"

"Up to eleven."

Maglor threw back his head and his laughter rang out. "That's my girl."

When the amp was turned up to, unfortunately, a lower setting than eleven, Maglor got behind the DW drums. Since the drums were set at a height more appropriate for Elanora, the seven-foot-tall Elf sitting behind the drum set was so comical that Sören and Søren erupted in hysterics, prompting Maglor to scowl, but Maglor made it work, thundering away as Elanora played a decent rendition of "Crosstown Traffic". When that was over they switched to Santana, and Medika came out for that, dancing with Sören to "Oye Como Va", waltzing, doing a mambo, twirling and dipping. After that, Medika cleared her throat and announced, "Birthday cake is hot from the oven."

"CAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAKE," Søren and Elanora yelled in unison. Elanora pulled off her guitar, hugged it again before putting it down, and then she and Søren tore off, racing each other to the main house. Sören, Maglor and Medika followed behind more slowly, Sören and Maglor walking hand in hand.

It looks good on you, Sören spoke into Maglor's mind.

What? Maglor raised an eyebrow.

Hope.

—

After a green frog design chocolate cake with mint chocolate chip ice cream, Elanora opened gifts, and then there was a rainbow-colored dragon piñata, with Maglor hoisting his daughter onto his shoulders so she could reach it. "Don't have too much candy now, since you just had all that sugar with cake and ice cream," Ali admonished after the candy bars, lollipops and mints rained down. "Besides, saving it for later means you can enjoy your birthday all over again."

"Like second birthday," Elanora said.

"Exactly." Ali grinned; Maglor rolled his eyes but also gave a chuckle.

Elanora knew she was half-Elven - it seemed that she would age like a normal human to adulthood and then probably age at the much slower pace of an Elf. She also understood it was necessary to keep this a secret outside the family. Elanora had also been informed that Tolkien's work wasn't entirely fictional, but she was still too young to be told the full history of the Noldor, and some parts - like the true nature of Fëanor's relationship with his brothers and second son - were better left till adulthood if they had to be discussed at all. The family was collectively very cautious about that subject matter, in the interest of protecting the children's innocence and mental health.

It was difficult enough just to be not entirely human, or to have an Eldar soul, and the necessity of the family secret meant they were all a bit insular, though the kids had a few friends outside the family, schoolmates. The weirdness of their collective existence, the guardedness with outsiders, and the trauma they had endured as a family - like the loss of Böðvar, Kenny, and Frankie in 2021 - meant they all spoiled the kids a little, though they also tried to balance it out with making them do chores and volunteer work. Such was the doting on the children that as Elanora put her candy in a basket to save for later, Maglor

asked her, "So, *selyë*, did you get everything you wanted for your birthday?"

"Mostly," Elanora said, and then she bit her lip and looked down, as if she were aware that sounded somewhat greedy.

"Mostly?" Maglor cocked his head to one side. "What did you want and not get?"

Sören was expecting Elanora to maybe ask for a pony or merchandise from the latest Pokemon game - Sören couldn't believe Pokemon was still going after all these years - but instead Elanora surprised him by saying, "I'd like to go on holiday. We never really go anywhere."

That much was true. Since the Balrog attack in 2021, the family had stayed as close to the farm as possible, in the safety of the wards, except for a few brief trips, like Sören accompanying Anthony to London to see his mum Elaine just before Christmas last year. But there had been no major vacations, not like other families.

Maglor and Ali looked at each other, then around the room, before looking back at Elanora. "Well, I suppose we could consider it," Maglor said; Ali and Sören both nodded together. "Did you have anyplace in mind?"

"Yeahyeahyeah!" Elanora began to flail excitedly. "I wanna go to Disney Universe!"

"What's Disney Universe?" Dag asked, who had been in captivity from 2020 until recently.

Sören exhaled. "It's like Disney World but in Toronto."

Sören, Maglor and Dooku had gone to Disney World in March 2021, not long before all hell broke loose. The world had changed a lot since then. California was always on fire nowadays and the Sun Belt had lost a significant portion of residents thanks to climate change and dwindling resources; Florida was also becoming less popular of a tourist destination with increasing storms and flooding, increasing heat and humidity. Disney World had closed in 2029, and Disneyland had shuttered almost a year ago. In its place was Disney Universe, in Toronto.

Canada's population had exploded in the last decade. First there was the wave of American refugees fleeing a second Trump administration that overturned *Roe v. Wade*, outlawed birth control, and rolled back civil rights to the 1950s, with the return of segregation, anti-miscegenation laws, and anti-LGBT legislation - transgender people not fortunate enough to flee to places like Canada and Europe had been rounded up and sent to "re-education" camps. In Trump's second term, a two-year war between the US and China had sent another wave of American refugees northward, and then, in the latter half of the 2020s, there were the climate refugees.

So Disney had capitalized on that and opened Disney Universe in Toronto, an even larger theme park than Disneyland or Disney World had been, with lots of new rides, using renewable energy and green technology.

Dag, of course, had been living in Toronto for over a decade up to his captivity in 2020 - he had been a professor of astrophysics at the University of Toronto. Sören worried that just mentioning Toronto would be triggering to Dag, since that had been where he'd been abducted, but to his relief Dag just nodded slowly, considering, and said, "I think you should take her. And I don't know who-all is going, but I'd... like to come along, if that's OK." Dag gave a small, shy smile. "It sounds fun."

It was one thing to say no to Elanora and disappoint the birthday girl, it was another thing to say no to Dag, after all Dag had been through. "I guess that's decided, then," Sören said with a sigh.

—

Once the kids were in bed - Dag also went to bed early, with the medication he was on - the grownups gathered in the living room of the main house to drink lemonade and talk about the impending trip to Toronto.

"First we need to discuss who's going," Dooku said. "As you know, it's a bad idea for a large group of us to leave the farm. It isn't simply the animals needing to be cared for, but a large group outside the parameter of the wards -"

Sören put up a hand; nobody in the room needed a reminder of the Balrog ambush in 2021, least of all himself.

"But it's an equally bad idea for only a couple of us to take Elanora to Disney Universe," Maglor said. "A small number of people is more easily overpowered."

"I agree," Dooku said.

"Ali and I should go, since that's our kid," Maglor said. "And we should take Metallica and Megadeth." He looked over at Sören. "And if we take Elanora, we have to take Junior."

"If we take Junior, I don't want to leave the girls behind," Sören said. "I'd feel better if we had one more adult come with us, since we're bringing all these kids. Besides Dag, I mean." Sören didn't want to be rude, but he doubted Dag's fighting capabilities after the trauma of captivity; Dag was more likely to flee or freeze.

"I'll go," Anthony said.

Dooku nodded. "I'll stay here, three Finwioni outside the wards at once is too big of a target."

"Are you sure, Nico?" Sören couldn't resist ribbing him a little. "You know you want a new pair of mouse ears from Disney Universe."

Dooku gave Sören a look, but his eyes twinkled. *Brat.* "That shan't be necessary."

Sören would miss Dooku, and he felt a little guilty about being with two of his three partners, but the logic was sound - it was more appealing to pick off three at once. *I'll make up for lost time when I return,* Sören spoke into Dooku's mind.

Indeed.

Might send you a dick pic to tease you. Sören needed to pick on him just a little more. *Maybe my dick wearing a mouse ears hat.*

I shall have to make up for lost spankings when you return, Fëanáro.

Sören waggled his eyebrows. Then he sobered, since they were discussing serious business.

"All right," Anthony said. "*When* are we leaving? I know Elanora would like to go soon, and while school is still on break the next two weeks, but I would feel safer if we took private transport and it will take me at least a few days to coordinate a non-emergency flight -"

Sören put up a finger, his heart beating faster. Now was the time to bring up Fëanor's latest invention. "We don't need to fly."

Anthony narrowed his eyes. "Please don't suggest driving out to Uluru or Sydney to take one of the portals -"

"No." Sören reached into his cargo pocket and passed it over. When Anthony took the mini-portal, he stared at it, confused. It was small and round, roughly the same size and shape as the lid of a jar of baby food, and had the appearance of spectral hematite.

"What is this?" Anthony asked.

"I made a portal."

Anthony's eyebrows shot up. "You... made..."

"Uncle Nat gave me a stone that he'd picked up in another universe, and we have two palantiri, so I broke one in half and took a piece and melted it down with the stone that had accumulated all the quantum whateverthefuck. That's a scientific term now." Sören smiled. "Anyway, the portal creates a wormhole. I've done some tests, I sent a few random objects to specific locations around the farm, overnight while you all were sleeping, to not create a disturbance. They made it safely, so I have confidence that we could use this to get to Toronto and back without having to fly. We just need to find a fairly private place to portal in, so we don't freak people out."

"You're quite sure this is safe? You haven't tested it on people yet," Anthony said.

"I haven't tested it on people, no, but like I said, I've tested it on objects. I wouldn't be suggesting we try it if I had any doubts - you know how I feel about my family."

There was a long pause - Sören knew Anthony was still somewhat incredulous, and he couldn't blame him for that - but then Maglor started nodding. "I trust your inventions, Adar. I'm willing to try it."

"OK, so now that just leaves us with the question of how long," Ali said. "I feel bad for saying this, because I'd really like to be able to give my daughter a proper vacation that's a week or two weeks long, but I don't feel like we should be away from the wards more than a few days."

"I agree," Anthony said. "If only for my peace of mind."

"Three days? If we leave tomorrow morning, we can spend Saturday, Sunday and Monday in Toronto, and come back Tuesday morning," Maglor said.

"Sounds good." Sören chuckled. "We'll probably be all Disney'd out in three days, anyway."

"More like two." Maglor laughed as well. "I was thinking we could spend Saturday and Sunday at Disney Universe and on Monday do some sightseeing in Toronto, I'm sure there are places besides Disney that the kids would like to see."

Sören gave a thumbs up and Maglor gave finger guns. Anthony laughed and shook his head. "I can't believe I'm going along with this." He flipped the mini-portal over and over in his hand, ran his thumb over it, and sighed before he handed it back to Sören. "I have done some *crazy shit* because of you and this might be the craziest yet."

"I love you too," Sören said. Anthony cackled and booped Sören's nose.

Chapter 6

"I can't believe I'm doing this," Anthony said, shaking his head.

"Jæja." Sören exhaled. "Neither can I."

Anthony clapped Sören on the back, and with an arm around his shoulders, they walked across the field, with Maglor, Ali, Dag and the kids following behind. Sören took one last look over his shoulder and Dooku waved.

As you know, I love you, Dooku spoke into his mind.

I love you too, Ñolo.

Be safe. Dooku gave a small smile before Sören turned to look ahead. *I would tell you "don't get in trouble" but you are trouble.*

Sören snorted, then he sobered as he pulled the mini-portal out of his pocket. "Here goes," he said under his breath.

It felt like coming full circle - the first time Sören had voluntarily used the portal network was to go to Canada to pick up Dag's daughters; now he was returning there twelve years later with Dag and his daughters. Last time, Sören, Dooku and Maglor had portaled into Fort Smith in the Northwest Territories of Canada, since one of the few portals in that region was along the Slave River. This time, they could go anywhere, and Sören and the others wanted a less remote location - somewhere that didn't require a lot of hiking and driving to get to Toronto, but wasn't gating in right in a busy area with witnesses.

Since the mini-portal had been crafted from a piece of one of the two palantiri in their possession, Sören gazed into it now. The sparkly black opaque, slightly reflective surface reminiscent of spectral hematite began to shimmer, then there were swirls like dark flame. Sören pushed with his mind. *Show me a location in this world's Toronto where it's not far from where we're going but there are fewer people to see us.*

Sören waited, heart beating faster, and after a long moment the mini-portal showed what appeared to be a park, green in the summertime, with a bridge over a flowing river, trees along trails. A biker whizzed down a trail. Sören bit his lip and pushed again, this time outward, not at the portal but *through* it, to touch the minds of any passerby, gently nudging them away from the area. When it felt like everything was clear, he nodded, and then he raised the mini-portal to the sky.

An orb of light shot out, the air sizzled, and there was a swirling vortex, blowing wind, glowing with cyan and violet light. Sören squinted - it was so bright it hurt - and then he gestured for the others to follow and ran up ahead. He'd watched several objects disappear through this gate and reappear at locations around the farm, but it was different to go through the wormhole himself. Heart hammering in his ears, mouth dry, he leapt into the light.

Everything went white, and it was too hot, like being dropped into a furnace. A furnace that was an elevator, going down and down and down, faster and faster. It had been long enough since the last time Sören had used one of the portals that he'd almost forgotten how unpleasant it was. His head spun and there was the sickening lurch in his stomach, skin fevered, and just before he could scream, there was another flash and he was thrown

onto his stomach in a patch of grass.

They'd made it - they were exactly where the mini-portal had shown them. Anthony landed next to him, and then Junior crashed on top of him. "WHEEEEEEEEEEEEE," Elanora yelled as she tumbled out in Maglor's arms. "That was fun, let's do it again!"

Maglor shook his head and rolled his eyes. "In a few days."

"Even that's too soon." Ali made a face as she brushed herself off. She helped Kate and Tori to their feet, and then Dag, who was shaking.

They all stood there for a moment, taking it all in - the peace of the park, in sharp contrast to the wild chaos of the wormhole. The park was even prettier up close than it had been in the window of the mini-portal - Sören smiled at the lush trees, the carpet of wildflowers, the sound of the flowing stream.

Then he started laughing with sheer relief and triumph. "We made it." Sören raised his arms in victory. "We did it. We fucking did it. It works. My invention WORKS -"

Anthony put a finger to his lips - though Sören had successfully used the Force to drive people away from the bike trail for a few minutes, allowing them to gate in without being seen, they didn't need to attract attention.

Sören's eyes met Dag's. It felt right that his first experience using his invention would be shared with his astrophysicist brother, who had long posited the theory that travel across worlds was possible; now Dag was seeing his theory proven, in part - they were still in the same universe, but Sören knew it could be used to gate into other worlds...

...maybe. Eventually. Sören swallowed hard, not wanting to think about that just yet. Not wanting to tempt himself.

Sören expected Dag to show at least a little happiness at seeing he was right, at the wonder of participating in a successful experiment with potentially huge ramifications... but Dag showed almost no emotion. Sören knew that the medication Dag was on had a slight blunting effect, but even so, it still felt completely off that all Dag could do was muster a flat, "Wow." No joy, no amazement. It was almost like Dag had portaled a hundred times and this was nothing new to him, but that didn't make sense - Sören didn't think his captors had been pushing him through the portals. Then again, he didn't know much about what the captivity was like, Dag never discussed it with him.

Sören wondered if he was being unfair - he knew he was biased, since the mini-portal was his invention, maybe he was expecting everyone to go gaga over it and everyone was except for Dag - but then Anthony raised an eyebrow and across their Force bond, Sören could feel Anthony's own concern, wondering why Dag was barely reacting. Anthony said nothing about it, however. Instead Anthony pulled out his cell phone and waited for the GPS to tell him where they were.

"We're at Étienne Brûle Park in Toronto," Anthony said. "I'll check Google and see about getting a cab to take us to a rental, from there we can find a hotel."

While self-driving vehicles were increasingly the norm, there were nonetheless some people who drove, and there would always be a market for hiring drivers. Anthony's GPS led the way to where they could wait for a cab - or at least a couple of them would be taking a cab out to a car rental, coming back to the park to pick up the others. Each of them had a backpack with a few days' worth of clothes; Sören's backpack also contained

the Silmarils, which he never left home without. Even though he knew he was taking a risk bringing them outside of the wards, he nonetheless thought it was potentially a bigger risk to leave them at home.

In the backpack was also their identification - for all the adults it was fake IDs - and some Canadian currency from the stash of international currency for over a dozen different countries that they had in a safe with "bug out" supplies in case they ever needed to evacuate the farm on short notice; though other countries had stayed out of America's two-year war with China - indeed, most European and Commonwealth countries had sanctions against the United States for its human rights violations starting under the second Trump regime, continuing under Trump's eldest son - there was nonetheless a concern that the UK would get involved at some point which would mean Commonwealth countries like Australia, closer in distance to China, would also get involved. Ceduna was nowhere near a major city but the US-China war still scared the family into being prepared to go at a moment's notice if missiles were ever pointing at Adelaide.

Sören thought of that now as they sat on a bench, waiting for the cab. Sören hadn't been to Canada since 2021 and he knew logically a lot had changed, but even now it seemed a lot more crowded, with all the Americans who had fled the States and come northward. Canada was the new world superpower, and just sitting, watching the neverending traffic, that was palpable. Anthony took Sören's hand and squeezed, sensing his discomfort.

Ali accompanied Anthony in the cab, and the entire time they were gone Sören found himself panicking - while both Ali and Anthony were competent fighters, and Sören knew Anthony was always armed unless he was naked, two were still potentially overpowered. Sören tried to reason with himself, that Sauron attempting another Balrog attack in the middle of Toronto would blow whatever cover Sauron had going in this world, and Anthony was better prepared for enemy agents than Dag had been. But despite his efforts to stay calm and distract himself by playing cards with his son and daughters while they waited, he felt his hysteria rising, almost in tears by the time Ali and Anthony returned with a rental van.

Their first stop was a hotel to check in. Ali and Maglor got one room by themselves, the girls would room with Metallica, and Junior would room with Megadeth. It was decided that Dag shouldn't be unsupervised - Anthony was slightly paranoid about Dag being captured again - so as much as Sören would have liked total privacy with Anthony, they got a two-bedroom suite to share with Dag. Once they unloaded in the hotel rooms, Anthony booked online "fast passes" for Disney Universe, and they convened in the lobby to head right back out to Disney.

Because Anthony had gotten passes online, they didn't have long to wait to get admitted. They were each given a special bracelet before being let through the entrance gates. Elanora and Junior ran through together, screaming, and on the other side they hugged each other and spun around until they collapsed together on the pavement. Junior helped Elanora up and then he rushed over to Sören and started tugging the hem of his shirt.

"Dad. Dad. Dad. Let's get mouse ears first and wear them."

That extended to Maglor - once the mouse ear hats were purchased and quickly personalized with names, Ali picked Elanora up and Elanora ceremoniously deposited a hat that said "Marcus" in gold thread on her father's head. The sight of Maglor wearing a mouse ears hat made Sören gigglesnort and he tried to rein it in, but he lost it when Ali put Anthony's hat on him before putting him in a headlock and giving him noogies.

There was a lot to see in the park - they could easily be there until late evening and only

see one half of it. But they would return again tomorrow, so that was exactly what they did, exploring the eastern half of Disney Universe. There were rides familiar to Sören's visit to Disney World in 2021 - like the Mad Tea Party, where Sören got in a teacup with Anthony, while Metallica, Megadeth, Søren and Elanora shared a teacup, and Ali, Maglor and Dag shared another teacup, and Kate and Tori had a teacup to themselves. Mister Toad's Wild Ride was another. Splash Mountain was yet another. The song at It's A Small World made Sören tear up, remembering his visit to Disney World in 2021 when Kate and Tori were still babies... recollecting how much the world had changed since then. How much *he* had changed since then. How hard he was now. How bitter.

Anthony gave Sören a fierce, tight hug when they left It's A Small World. "I know," Anthony said softly, petting Sören's curls as Sören rested his head on Anthony's shoulder. "I know."

Space Mountain and the Matterhorn Bobsleds made Sören queasy, especially after his jump through quantum spacetime from one continent to another, and he needed a break after that. They had a slower ride through a new attraction, Olof's Snow Palace, complete with biodegradable fake snow, animatronic snowmen, penguins and polar bears that sang goofy songs and did ridiculous dances, and where they passed through an "avalanche" that rained wrapped peppermint candy. After Olof's Snow Palace, Junior and Elanora broke out into songs from *Frozen* until Ali facepalmed and said, "All right, that's enough."

"Does that mean I should..." Elanora gave Junior a look, and then with a dramatic sweeping flourish she belted out, "*Let it go, let it gooooo...*"

"*Can't hold it back anymore,*" Junior sang.

"Oh my god," Ali muttered.

Another new attraction was *Fantasia*, a ride that involved riding on spinning stars and planets and being chased by "magic" gone amok like flying brooms, at last descending onto a platform whirling in a maelstrom of water, getting splashed by flying buckets, while "L'apprenti sorcier" by Paul Dukas played. Maglor loved it, and it tickled Sören to see Maglor enjoying himself so unabashedly.

"I want to go again," Maglor said when it was over. "Who's with me?"

Elanora and Junior put their hands up. Sören snickered and shook his head, then put his own hand up - if only to watch Maglor's happiness. Then he glanced over at Dag and maneuvered Dag's arm into the air. "Come on," Sören said. "We loved *Fantasia* when we were kids."

"We did?" Then Dag cleared his throat. "We did," he said more affirmatively.

"And the astrophysicist in you has to be getting a kick out of riding on planets and shit," Sören said.

Dag gave a wan smile and a nod.

Then Sören felt a twinge of guilt for volunteering him - he didn't want Dag to be forced into something he didn't want to do. "If you don't want to go, it's OK -"

"No, it's fine." Dag smiled again. "It just... you know. Feels surreal. All of this."

Sören exhaled. He realized that Dag probably had a lot of mixed feelings about being

back in Toronto after all these years; he would too if the situation was reversed. Sören put an arm around his brother, trying to show support, and led the way back to the queue for the ride.

—

That night Sören didn't sleep well, despite snuggling with Anthony. Some of it, Sören knew, was sleeping in a strange place - and for the first time in years - but most of it was being worried about Dag in the next room of the suite. He thought about Dag's blunted emotions, and he had concerns that Dag was triggered by being back in Toronto. So every now and again Sören got up to check on Dag. After the fifteenth time Anthony's arms locked around him, and there was a stern "*Rest.*"

Don't make me tie you up, Anthony spoke into Sören's mind.

Sören kissed his cheek. *Promises, promises.*

Anthony swatted Sören's bum, and then began to rub his back. The silver-gold light of Anthony's Force signature - like the light of the Trees - wrapped around him like a blanket cocoon, Anthony's hands warm and tingly, and soon Sören fell asleep, staying put till the alarm went off.

But it had been late enough when Anthony intervened that Sören felt exhausted when the alarm went off - he'd only gotten maybe four hours of sleep, and judging from Anthony's rumpled bleariness, he hadn't slept much either, which Sören felt guilty about, knowing his restlessness had kept Anthony up. Nevertheless, they were determined to press on with day two of Disney for the kids' sake.

In the rental van the fatigue really hit Sören, dozing off in his seat until Junior shook him away. "I need coffee," Sören said.

"Me too," Anthony grumbled.

Sören remembered the last time he'd been to Canada - the big road trip across the country - and vaguely recalled Tim Horton's coffee was pretty good. He had known about Tim Horton's because Dag had gone there just about every day prior to his abduction. Sören pulled out his cell phone, did a quick Google search, and sure enough, there was a Tim Horton's on the way to Disney Universe. "Let's stop at Tim's," Sören said.

"Tim's?" Dag sounded confused. "Who's Tim?"

Sören's eyebrows shot up. He realized that devoid of context, maybe Dag thought they had a friend in the area named Tim - though Dag had been home a few months now and should have realized they didn't really have friends outside the family - but once again, Sören had that feeling of something being really "off". He knew Dag had PTSD and trauma sometimes caused memory loss, but it didn't seem right for Dag to completely forget the memory of someplace he'd had coffee daily for years. "Tim Horton's," Sören said, hoping Dag was just missing context.

"Yeah, who is that?"

Oh shit. If Dag didn't remember Tim Horton's, things were a lot more serious than Sören realized. His heart started to beat faster, and he swallowed hard. "It's a coffee and donuts

chain. You used to get coffee here all the time before..."

"Oh." Dag frowned. "I'm a dumbass, sorry."

"You have PTSD," Sören said, reaching over to pat him. But Sören had PTSD and didn't have huge holes in his memory like that. *I also wasn't held prisoner for twelve years.* Sören wondered what kind of drugs they'd used on him. Then he wondered what else Dag forgot. It didn't seem right that Dag would remember they were brothers, and Kate and Tori were really his daughters, and even that he'd been married to Matt and Matt hadn't made it... and yet wouldn't remember Tim Horton's. But Sören wasn't an expert on amnesia. He just knew Dag not remembering was concerning, and when they got out of the van and walked across the parking lot to the coffee shop, the look Anthony gave him let Sören know that Anthony was a bit unnerved as well.

Sören tried to shake off the disconcerted, something-not-quite-right feeling over a breakfast of coffee and "Timbits" donut holes, and once they got to Disney Universe, Sören managed to be sufficiently distracted by exploring the western half of the amusement park. They boarded a Pirates of the Caribbean ride that was a pirate ship swinging back and forth, then they visited a couple of the newer attractions. There was Alice's Wonderland, where they rushed down the rabbit hole, and rode through a house where objects were very small, then very large, then they rode through a garden where flowers danced while the Caterpillar sang, then they were batted around in a croquet match, finally fleeing from the Queen of Hearts and her minions. There was Jungle World, where they rode on enormous mechanical animals like a bear, a panther, and even flying vultures, through a hothouse set up to resemble a jungle; Disney Universe boasted that food grown in the hothouse, like bananas, was donated to local schools. There was the much more subdued Princess Carousel, which played "Once Upon A Dream" - Sören smiled at the sight of Anthony riding a flower-crowned swan.

But the best was yet to come. After more water rides, including a Finding Nemo themed ride that got a bit wild, they went to Rapunzel's Castle, where "Rapunzel's hair" pulled them up and up and up, then they sped down, like a falling elevator. Sören couldn't help but tease Anthony across their Force bond. *Arafinwë, Arafinwë, let down your hair.*

Anthony gave Sören a look, but chuckled. *Pretty sure that's not how the story went.*

For all we know that could be canon in some universe somewhere. Sören booped Anthony's nose. *Maybe in some universe you're still blond.*

I doubt that. I come from a long line of dark-haired people... and gingers.

So maybe you dye it. Sören snickered at the mental image. *Uncle Nat said there's a universe where it was World War II and we were there - maybe there's a universe where it's the 1980s and you've got a bleach blond mullet...*

Anthony made noises like he was in pain, but then he laughed too. *God, Sören. That's downright diabolical.*

Sören grinned.

They stayed to watch Drake perform in concert, and there was a fireworks display at the end of the show. Sören hadn't seen fireworks in a very long time, and it made him misty-eyed. He tried to keep it together for the sake of the kids, but Junior noticed - even at his young age he was observant - and he frowned a little. "Why are you crying, Dad?"

Maglor put a hand on Sören's shoulder. "That dorky dance Drake does during 'Hotline Bling' is enough to make a grown man cry," Maglor quipped.

"I like 'Hotline Bling,'" Junior said, folding his arms. "It's pretty good for old people music."

Sören facepalmed - they were now living in an era where a song from 2015 was officially "old people music". Anthony started making noises again, and gave Junior noogies.

They had a late dinner in the hotel restaurant, and after dinner, Sören and Anthony took advantage of the jacuzzi in their suite, cuddling together in the hot tub with a glass of champagne. Yet, even as the heat and bubbles relaxed his body, Sören's mind once again started ruminating on Dag not remembering Tim Horton's this morning.

It was after midnight when they got out of the hot tub and their day would start at eight tomorrow, so after putting on T-shirts and boxer-briefs they climbed into bed together. Anthony held Sören close and stroked his curls, rubbed his back, but even the tight, safe feeling of the strong arms around him, listening to Anthony's heartbeat, soothed by his touch, couldn't get Sören unstuck from wondering what was wrong with his brother, and a few minutes into the petting, Anthony stopped and said, simply, "Sören."

Sören could feel the weight of the unspoken words - Anthony didn't want a repeat of last night where Sören kept getting out of bed to look in on Dag, and Sören couldn't blame him. "Jæja," Sören said under his breath.

Anthony cupped Sören's chin in his hand and in the blue glow of the digital alarm clock, he met Sören's eyes. *I know, he spoke into Sören's mind. I'm worried too. What they did to him... it doesn't really explain why he wouldn't remember certain things like Tim Horton's. A pause. Or Fantasia.*

Sören exhaled sharply. *I don't get it. I wonder what else he doesn't remember. Or maybe...* Sören shuddered. *Do you think he's like, you know, the Manchurian candidate.*

Oh god, Sören. Anthony pinched the bridge of his nose and chuckled softly. I mean, we'd all be dead by now if the Russians or Americans programmed him to kill other Force sensitives, you think?

You're right. Sören patted Anthony's shoulder and snuggled closer. I've seen too many conspiracy movies. He hated thinking it, hated being suspicious for even a moment, but after the betrayal of Freyr and Loki...

Well, it feels like we're living in a bloody conspiracy movie so I can't blame you for going there. The truth is probably far simpler, and far stranger than that. Anthony scowled. He probably needs to have an MRI done, see if there's any brain damage.

Wouldn't they have looked at that when you guys had him, before you released him to us?

Anthony shook his head. Only the bare minimum amount of tests were done, like bloodwork. My department didn't want him to feel like he was being experimented on again, he was subjected to regular brain scans in captivity. And... for that reason, getting him to agree to an MRI is probably easier said than done. Maybe we should hold off unless he's forgetting more important things.

You're right.

But the possibility that the Russians and/or Americans had damaged Dag enough to bring about something akin to early-onset dementia was still terrifying, and Sören continued to lay there, tensed up. A few more moments passed and finally Anthony gently rolled Sören onto his stomach, straddled Sören's hips and ass, and began to knead Sören's back. Sören involuntarily flexed his fingers and toes, like a cat, and made a guttural noise as Anthony found the tension knots and worked them, the Force pulsing in his touch.

"It's OK, baby," Anthony whispered, kneading and kneading. "It's all right, lovey."

Sören sighed, and melted into Anthony's touch. Anthony rubbed and rubbed, knowing after all these years how to work Sören's muscles, relief flowing through him. After Anthony had been kneading and rolling Sören's back for awhile, Sören felt Anthony's hard cock rubbing in the crack of his ass, against one ass cheek then the other, against one thigh then the other. That woke up Sören's cock, and after Sören made an "mmmm", Anthony rolled Sören onto his stomach and began to palm the hard bulge in Sören's boxer-briefs, leaning in for a deep kiss.

We can't wake up Dag, Sören spoke into Anthony's mind, looking him in the eye.

"We won't," Anthony whispered, and began kissing Sören's neck. When Sören moaned, Anthony's free hand came up and he stuck two fingers in Sören's mouth.

Anthony pulled down his boxer-briefs, and Sören's, freeing their hard cocks. He took them both into his fist, stroking slowly as they kissed and kissed. When Anthony's hand sped up, he began kissing Sören's neck again, licking, with the fingers of his free hand in Sören's mouth to stifle the moans. He claimed Sören's mouth again, gripping tighter, stroking harder. Sören started rocking his hips, thrusting against Anthony's cock, enjoying the velvet steel rubbing against him in the tight, warm fist... the sight of Anthony's long, thick, perfectly formed cock on his cock, man to man, brother to brother. Their precum made streamers between their cock heads, the sight lewd and delicious.

"I love you," Anthony whispered.

"I love you," Sören whispered back.

"I will always take care of you, Fëanáro." Anthony kissed him again. "Always looking out for you. My life for you -"

Sören kissed him harder, the Fëanor part of him responding to Finarfin's loyalty, all passion and fire. Anthony kissed him back just as fiercely, matching fire for fire, the fire of their blood. Eons ago, Fëanor had sent Finarfin back to Valinor, to renounce him, hoping that would save Finarfin and his children. Sören would not push him away again, this time, along the Helcaraxë of his grief, the inner exile that was never over. He needed. He craved. Anthony needed just as much, Finarfin making up for lost time, lost life. They would *live* now, sharing the eternity that had been stolen from them. Each mad, urgent rutting was another spit in the eye of Manwë, an act of defiance that made the pleasure so much more delicious. Sören had lost so much, endured so much, but they had this, these moments that felt like stealing fire from heaven, burning together so sweetly.

"I love you, love you, love you," Sören whispered into Anthony's neck, kissing it.

"I love you." Anthony kissed him. "So much." Anthony's grip tightened like a vise. He stroked as hard as he could; Sören's hand covered his, guiding. Their tongues rubbed together, teasing, before they kissed again. And again. Kissing, licking, as the pleasure built higher and deeper, Sören's balls ready to explode, but he needed just a little more.

Just a little more. Needed to stay lost in this beautiful space where all that mattered was their bodies, their lust, their sex, their hunger, glorious.

Anthony let out a growl, nipping at Sören's lower lip. "Come with me," he whispered, and crushed Sören's mouth to his.

They let out a muffled cry into the kiss as they spurted together, cock creaming cock. Sören felt Anthony's cock pulsing and twitching against his, and that made Sören come all the harder, ecstasy throbbing, a full-body relief that left him giddy and breathless.

They rubbed noses, then kissed again, more tender this time. Anthony pulled Sören against his chest and held him tight, rocking him. Sören sighed deeply.

For now, Finarfin had calmed Fëanor's storm, and Sören sailed off to sleep in the swan boat of Arafinwë's heart.

Chapter 7

Despite Anthony's tender loving care helping him get some rest, Sören woke up an hour before the alarm went off - unusual for him - and after checking on Dag, he threw on some clothes and decided to burn off some of his nervous energy by going for a brisk walk around the hotel courtyard, which included a waterfall and a garden. Sören stopped in the hotel cafe to get an iced coffee to take with him, and after he'd made a few laps he sat on one of the benches, looking out at the waterfall, trying to let it soothe him...

...but somehow, the waterfall made his agitation worse. Sören started thinking of the waterfalls back home in Iceland. He hadn't returned to Iceland since late 2020, and moreover, he *couldn't*. Their deaths had been faked, their identities changed. Sören's cousin Ari had been told he was dead. For the first few years after the sudden relocation to Australia, Sören had done some occasional poking on Google to check up on Ari, but he'd eventually had to stop because it hurt too much. Twelve years had passed, and Sören was almost forty-eight, but he hadn't aged since 2019; Iceland had roughly three hundred thousand people, his own hometown of Akureyri - what he missed most - just shy of twenty thousand. There was a non-zero chance that Sören would be recognized if he returned home. He didn't need that kind of trouble, both in and of itself and the restrictions MI6 would likely put on them after they cleaned up the trouble.

You can't go home again, Sören told himself, bitterly staring into the fall. It's just how it is. You have to accept it.

And Sören had been resigned to that every time his heart ached for Iceland... but he didn't like it. Here and now, in Toronto, looking at a beautiful waterfall that was nonetheless manmade and felt like a cheap imitation of the magnificent waterfalls in his home country, Sören's heart didn't just ache for Iceland, it *burned*. He didn't hate living in Australia - family was the most important thing in his life, and he had that in abundance now. The peace of the sheep farm was as close as he could get to being in Eyjafjörður, while still being in Australia; he could see why his late uncle had settled there. But even though Australia had become home, Iceland was still *home*, and what was supposed to be a fun, happy holiday in Toronto was like pouring salt in the wound, teasing him with what he could not have, where he could not go.

Sören found himself reaching into his pocket, thumb and forefinger rubbing the mini-portal that he habitually carried with him. Maybe there was a way to safely visit. After all, they didn't have to fly there. If he was recognized, he could run to the nearest secluded spot and portal out.

Of course, it would be better if he wasn't recognized at all. And Sören knew running off to the nearest hideaway spot was easier said than done in Reykjavik in broad daylight, even less feasible in the sheep country of Eyjafjörður, everything out in the open.

Sören pulled the mini-portal out of his pocket and his fist closed around it, tight. "*Fokk*," he hissed under his breath.

"Jæja?"

Sören jumped - and it was Maglor. Usually, Sören could feel his partners' presence in the Force, but sometimes both Maglor and Dooku were prone to masking it.

Maglor sat next to Sören on the bench and put an arm around him, his other hand

covering Sören's hand, holding the mini-portal. "I didn't mean to startle you."

"S'OK." Sören smiled.

"I didn't know you'd be out here," Maglor said. He smiled back. "As you know..."

"I usually don't wake up this early if I don't have to." Sören shrugged. "I've been feeling restless."

"And homesick."

Their eyes met, and held. Of course, they were Force bonded and Maglor was a strong empath, but hearing the truth of his feelings exposed like that nonetheless took Sören aback. He blinked slowly and swallowed hard. There was no use denying it.

"It's a perfectly normal and understandable feeling," Maglor said.

Sören looked away, and around - they were the only people in the courtyard right now, but Sören was living under a Danish persona so mentioning Iceland as his home out in the open could potentially lead to trouble.

Maglor spoke into his mind, sensing the concern. *You're thinking about visiting again.* Maglor tapped the hand holding the mini-portal.

Sören looked down. *I know I shouldn't be. It's very risky. There's a chance I'll be recognized. Those chances go way the fuck up if I go back to Akureyri and that's where I really want to go.*

Maglor nodded, and kept nodding. Finally he looked out ahead, watching the waterfall - seeming to look *beyond* the waterfall, as if he were seeing the waves of the Song. "There might be a way," Maglor said softly.

Sören raised an eyebrow. *What? Plastic surgery? A goofy costume -*

"No." Maglor stood up and tousled Sören's curls. "We can discuss it later. In the meantime, let's get some more coffee in your system. We have a lot to see on our last day here."

—

Toronto had changed a lot in the twelve years since Dag had lived there, the twelve years since Sören had visited there... but it was still as if Dag was seeing it for the first time. He didn't recognize his old neighborhood, or even the University of Toronto, where he had been a professor. It broke Sören's heart, and it worried him.

The most worrisome moment of all was when they went to East York Skatepark. Dag and Sören had been avid skateboarders in their teens - some of Sören's fondest memories of Dag were afternoons skateboarding, listening to Dag's Green Day, Sublime, Offspring, Foo Fighters and Blink-182 CDs. In the years since Toronto had exploded in population, there was now a kiosk where a skateboard or pair of rollerskates could be rented. Since nobody had thought to bring any of that on the trip - indeed, Sören had not done skateboarding in years - they stopped at the kiosk.

Sören knew Dag probably hadn't gotten a chance to skateboard during his time in captivity, but despite Sören's long absence from his old hobby, Sören's muscle memory seemed to remember enough that it was just like the way people reported remembering how to ride a horse or a bicycle after years of not doing so. Sören wasn't as smooth as he had been as a teenager, but it was enough to enjoy himself.

Dag, on the other hand, struggled with it like it was his first time, finally faceplanting on the pavement. Anthony had brought a first-aid kit and tended to scrapes, making concerned-fatherly noises, while Sören and Maglor looked at each other, and Sören could feel Maglor's own questioning of what was going on... what was the full extent of the damage done to Dag's mind.

Ali folded her arms and pursed her lips, but then Elanora yelled, "Mum! Mum! Watch this!" and rode up the half-pipe and back down, giggling. Ali whistled and clapped.

It was decided that for their last stop before dinner, Elanora could pick out where to go, since she was the birthday girl. Elanora wanted to go to a music store, which made Maglor groan and chuckle - it wasn't like they didn't have musical instruments at home - but then, that was something Sören understood. He liked going to art supply stores, even when he had more than enough art supplies.

When Elanora was finished skateboarding, Ali handed her the princess tiara and purple cape that Elanora had wanted to wear on her birthday tour of Toronto, and it amused Sören greatly to watch Elanora leading the way into the music shop in a brisk march, dragging Junior by the arm.

Elanora was a virtuoso like her father - she could play guitar, bass, piano, and drums. In each section of the store there were instruments on display that could be tested before purchase, as well as a small "band" area with two Fender guitars, an Ibanez bass, a set of DW drums, and Roland synthesizers. Elanora made a beeline for this and got right behind the drum set even though it was slightly too big for her. "Let's rock, Dad!"

Maglor laughed and followed his daughter. He picked up the red Fender Stratocaster. "What do you want to play?"

Elanora thought for a moment, tapping a drumstick against her chin. Then she said, "I wanna play AC/DC."

Maglor played the riff of "Back In Black" while Elanora thumped away on the drums. This drew a small crowd, amazed by how well such a young child could play the drums. Elanora had a huge grin on her face, and Maglor smiled back at her, once again tugging at Sören's heartstrings - he loved seeing Maglor that happy. And Elanora's joy was infectious. Sören was proud of her, and he hoped that she would always be that bright little ray of sunshine... that the Doom would never take that away from her.

Junior's applause and cheering was the loudest of all when the song was over. "I wanna hear Metallica!" he yelled, then he looked at Metallica and said, "The band, I mean."

Metallica the person laughed, ruffled his curls, and nodded. "I was named for a very good band, so yeah, play Metallica next!"

Maglor and Elanora looked at each other - Sören had the sense they were privately discussing the selection via telepathy - and then they launched into "Sad But True". Elanora could give Lars Ulrich a run for his money, and Sören's pride was even fiercer. At the end of the song, Junior ran over and gave Elanora a big hug.

"Any more requests?" Maglor asked.

Sören glanced over at Dag, who had been watching everything with a wistful look on his face - Sören wondered if Dag was feeling regrets about the years of Kate and Tori's lives that he'd missed, and that thought tore at him.

Sören had never told Kate and Tori they weren't his biological children, and since they'd seen pictures of Junior's mother Frankie, who had red hair, Sören knew they were probably under the impression that Frankie had been their mother. He had been planning on having that talk with them eventually... and now he felt guilty. Dag wasn't ready to be a full-time parent again, but Sören wondered if giving Dag a chance to connect with his daughters would help tether him enough to the present that he could start to remember more of the past.

In the meantime, Sören hoped he could jog Dag's memory a little. "'Everlong'?"

"Everlong" was a very difficult song to play on the drums, and Elanora still nailed it. Her smile seemed even brighter for the challenge. They had now drawn a crowd from the street, as it wasn't every day people got to see a nine-year-old girl wearing a princess crown and cape, pounding the drums like a maniac. But the crowd made Sören a little paranoid - Maglor picked up on it and unstrapped the guitar when the song was done, taking a dramatic bow. He scooped up Elanora, hoisted her onto his shoulders, and Elanora also took a bow to wild applause.

"This has been the best birthday ever," Elanora said, riding Maglor's shoulders on the way out of the store.

"You did an amazing job," Dag said, reaching up to take Elanora's hand for a minute.

"Thanks," Elanora said, squeezing his hand.

Sören hoped Dag remembered how much he loved Foo Fighters when they were growing up. When Dag fell back alongside him, the smile Dag gave him was hopeful. Sören put an arm around his brother's shoulders and gave him noogies.

Elanora looked over her shoulder at Sören. "I hope your birthday will be just as good as mine. You're always so sad."

Sören gave a nervous laugh - he tried really hard to disguise it, not wanting any of the kids to be burdened by the grief he carried for Frankie and, until recently, for Dag - but he supposed that being here in Toronto and feeling his homesickness for Iceland more acutely was making it a little more obvious. "We'll see," he said.

But then he looked at Dag again - they shared a birthday. If nothing else, Sören wanted Dag to enjoy his first birthday out of captivity. It was August and their birthday wasn't until November, so they had time to plan.

Perhaps, a plan to go to Akureyri, their hometown.

A hope that finally, the wall around Dag's memories would crack, and he would start to remember.

Sören sighed.

Soon, Maglor spoke into his mind. *We'll talk soon.*

—

Throughout dinner, Dag watched the kids' rowdy horseplay with that same wistful look in his eye, and Sören's conscience couldn't take it anymore. So back at the hotel, Sören called a family meeting in his suite.

He took a few moments to gather his words, and then he looked Kate and Tori in the eye and said, "OK, I have a confession to make, and I hope you won't be angry with me for not telling you sooner than this."

"What is it, Dad?" Kate asked.

"That's just it." Sören sighed. "I'm not your biological father. He is." Sören pointed to Dag.

Dag squirmed and now Sören felt even worse - he hadn't meant to put Dag on the spot - but he also knew there was no really good time to have this conversation so they might as well have it during a low-stress, happy time, rather than in some sort of future chaos-filled crisis scenario.

Tori blinked and sat back in her chair. Kate's mouth opened. Tori's eyebrows shot up.

Sören nodded solemnly. "When he was abducted in 2020, a friend of his was babysitting you and called me when he hadn't come back. I went to Canada to come get you, and I raised you as mine because, well, the trail went cold pretty quick and we thought he was..." Sören didn't finish the sentence. He couldn't.

He didn't have to. "Dead," Junior said. "You thought he was dead. That's why you never mentioned him."

"Right. It hurt too much, and we have enough Aboriginal people in the family that I upheld the taboo about saying the name of the deceased." Sören exhaled and looked down at his Doc Martens. When he looked up, he saw the tears in Kate and Tori's eyes, and his own eyes misted too, not wanting to hurt them. "I was planning on telling you eventually, I don't like lying to you, but even without the taboo and the trauma, we had to get new identities, a whole new life. For some reason, nobody's dug too deep at Ali being my maternal cousin." Sören knew, of course, that reason was due to the wards, and it helped that they lived in a remote area and kept a low profile. "If I had told you when you were very small, there's a chance you wouldn't have understood why it was bad to tell other people, and potentially blown our cover -"

"I get it, Dad," Kate said, and then she covered her mouth.

"Oh god." Tori blinked back tears. "We... can we still call you Dad..."

"Yes," Sören said vehemently, the tears spilling down his own cheeks. "I raised you, and, well... my brother's still really not in a position to be your full-time parent."

"You don't have to call me Dad if you don't want to," Dag said.

"I was going to wait awhile longer but I think it would be good for him to do dad-type things with you sometimes," Sören said. *Forgive me*, he spoke into Dag's mind. He went on, "I

don't want to pressure you, I know you guys are still getting to know each other, but..."

"We can try," Kate said, and Tori nodded.

"This won't really change much," Sören assured them. "I'm still your father here." Sören put his hand on his heart. "You can still call me Dad. I still have primary responsibility for you. I will always be here for you. It's just... you have another dad, too. Besides the other dads you've already got."

"More dad jokes," Tori said.

Dag narrowed his eyes; he might not remember much but he'd been back long enough to get a taste of how Sören was. "I'm not as bad as he is."

Sören grinned, not able to help himself. "Hi Not As Bad As He Is -"

Anthony used the Force to throw a couch pillow at Sören, who ducked.

Junior had been watching this entire exchange quietly, solemnly, and finally he spoke up, "Is he my -" Junior looked at Dag, then back at Sören, and his face fell.

"Oh god." Sören's laughter turned back to tears. "Oh god. No, you're my biological son. Your mother died a few months after you were born." *And I still miss her.* "But Kate and Tori are your cousins, biologically."

"Still sisters in heart," Kate said, reaching out to Junior, and Tori nodded.

That made Sören tear up some more; Anthony put an arm around him. *I know*, Anthony spoke into his mind.

"The most important thing is that we're all here, we're all family, and we look out for each other," Ali said.

"I hope you're not mad at me," Sören said to the girls.

"I'm not mad," Tori said.

"Oh god," Kate muttered.

Sören took the opportunity that presented itself. "Hi Not Mad -"

"DAAAD. DAD PLEASE."

Now Kate threw a couch pillow at him. Sören caught it.

"Here," Ali said, standing up. "We don't want too much serious business during Elanora's birthday celebration..." Ali gave Sören a look and shot into his mind, *You could have warned me you were about to drop that bomb.*

It was spur of the moment. Sören frowned. *I hadn't planned on telling them today, but it kills me to see Dag watching them like he's on the outside looking in.*

Fair. But still. I'm not sure we should be encouraging impulsive behavior in you, git.

Sören smirked. *Hi Not Sure We Should Be Encouraging Impulsive Behavior -*

Ali scowled, then she grinned too, cleared her throat, and went on, "There's a pool downstairs with a water slide and today has been plenty hot, who wants to join me?"

"Yay swimming!" Elanora got right up, clapping excitedly.

The enthusiasm for a dip in the pool was unanimous - except for Maglor. Before Sören could grab his swim trunks and head out with the rest of them, Maglor stopped Sören with a hand on his shoulder. *If it's all right, I thought we could talk now, while everyone else is occupied*, Maglor spoke into his mind.

Sören was a little disappointed about not going to the pool... but he knew his curiosity would get the better of him the longer they went without addressing what Maglor was hinting at this morning. "All right," Sören said aloud.

Maglor glanced over at Anthony and their eyes held - Sören knew they were communicating something privately by telepathy, then Anthony gave a small nod and waved on his way out.

Sören was about to sit back down, but Maglor shook his head. "Meet me in my suite in fifteen minutes or so?" Maglor asked.

That was odd - Sören didn't understand why they couldn't discuss this here, now that they were alone - but he nodded.

Maglor leaned down to plant a gentle kiss on Sören's brow, and tousled Sören's curls before walking off. Sören couldn't help staring at the way Maglor's jeans hugged his firm ass on the way out.

Sören took a deep breath and looked at the clock. This was going to be a long fifteen minutes.

Chapter 8

Maglor opened the door to his suite before Sören could knock. Maglor opened the door a small crack and stepped aside for Sören to open the door wider and walk through. As Maglor quickly closed the door behind him, Sören saw that Maglor was unglamoured - his black hair fell to his thighs, and his grey eyes flashed with hints of blue and gold like labradorite.

Then Sören noticed the rest. Maglor was wearing a pair of jeans but was shirtless, revealing his bare, muscular chest. Sören couldn't help but reach out to touch it, smirking. "So you wanted to 'talk', eh? This is what you're calling it now?"

Maglor kissed him - Sören's cock stiffened, and he groaned as he kissed Maglor back, fiercely - then Maglor pulled away and ruffled Sören's curls, chuckling. "I did want to actually talk, Sören, yes."

Maglor led Sören towards the bed. On a tray table between the armchair at the bedside, and the bed itself, was a bowl of fresh strawberries with whipped cream. "This was why I said fifteen minutes. I had to call room service," Maglor explained.

"And yet you just said you want to 'actually talk.'" Sören was confused, as this was so obviously a scene for seduction.

"I do. Sit down, and we'll talk first." Maglor patted the edge of the bed, before he sat down in the armchair.

Sören sat down and leaned forward.

"OK. This morning I said there might be a way for you to visit Iceland safely."

Sören nodded.

"There is." Maglor looked into Sören's eyes, and Sören watched as the iridescent flash faded from Maglor's eyes, so they were only grey, and then, suddenly, Maglor's hair was down to the middle of his back, not his thighs.

Sören blinked slowly, trying to compute. "You..."

"Look. You're still Fëanor, here." Maglor put his hand on his heart. "You may be human-bodied, but you're Elven-souled. And not just that. When you killed Odin... a normal, regular human can't do that. Even a Force-sensitive human can't do that, even a Force-sensitive human who's now immortal and has a constitution more like one of the Eldar, can't do that. But you did, because it takes a god to kill a god."

"The Flame Imperishable." Sören shifted his weight, feeling very uncomfortable with where this conversation was going. He knew, of course, that he wasn't normal, despite all the trappings of normalcy in his life. But he didn't like the concept of gods. To his way of thinking, gods were tyrants, predators.

"And I think you... absorbed his power, when you killed him. So you're even stronger than you once were, whether you realize it or not." Maglor tapped the pocket of Sören's jeans, where he knew Sören kept the mini-portal. "You're awakening."

Sören put it together. "So you're telling me I can glamour myself, like you do."

"Yes, Sören, that's exactly right. You're already part of the way there. You can see through glamour -"

"Well, to be honest, I haven't been doing that in a long time." For many years, Sören had been painting what his mind's eye saw - he had painted Frankie as Lalwen, and Maglor as non-human, before he knew what they were - and in the first couple years after Dag was taken, Sören had consciously drawn on that ability. He had been able to see Ingwion disguised as a homeless man, once. But after relocating to a sheep farm outside of Ceduna, with far fewer people encountered on a regular basis, Sören had fallen out of the habit of scanning everyone and everything. He also hadn't been painting - he'd been warned by Anthony that he had a very distinctive painting style and it would blow his alias, so Sören had shifted his artistic impulses to other mediums, like glasswork and blacksmithing; Elanora's guitar had been the first time Sören had picked up a brush in years. He had a feeling his ability to will himself to see beyond the physical - or though the illusion of such - was rusty from lack of use.

"It's still there. Anyway, I think you should try. So that's what all this is for. I thought I would give you some incentive to start practicing."

Sören glanced at the bowl of strawberries, then at Maglor. He laughed, tickled by the obvious bribe. "OK. I can try."

"Good." Maglor grinned. "Now get naked."

Sören took his clothes off as quickly as he could, but Maglor kept his jeans on. Before Sören could flop back on the bed, Maglor picked up the bowl of strawberries and walked across the hardwood floor of the hotel suite, over to a charcoal grey rug. He sat down, and gestured for Sören to join him on the rug.

Once Sören was also on the rug, Maglor said, "Now, for each successful new trick... you get a treat."

"Oh boy." Sören crinkled his nose and bit his lower lip.

"Let's start with something small and simple, like the length of your hair. Can you make it a little longer?"

Sören took a deep breath and closed his eyes. He conjured a mental image of himself with shoulder-length curls, and then a mental image of himself at an easel, painting it. With each stroke of the brush in his visualization, he pushed the mental image outward, tensing his body, clenching his fists, breathing it. He felt nothing, and his heart sank - he wasn't going to be able to do this - but then Maglor's eyes widened, his face lit up, and he clapped excitedly.

"You did it." Maglor reached out to grab a lock of Sören's hair, holding it within his line of sight so Sören could see the increased length.

"That's funny, because I don't feel it."

Maglor shook his head. "You won't. It's an illusion. In contrast, I always feel the full weight of my hair no matter how short it appears to others."

"Makes sense."

Maglor pulled a whipped cream topped strawberry out of the bowl and held it to Sören's lips. "Good boy," he said.

Sören bit into the strawberry - it was juicy and sweet, and the juices and cream dripped down Maglor's fingers. Sören took another bite, then licked Maglor's fingers clean. Maglor gave a little purring growl, and Sören's cock stiffened.

"Now for something harder," Maglor said.

Sören gestured downward. Maglor rolled his eyes and gave Sören a playful swat. "Try to change the color of your hair," Maglor said. "For just beginning, it's easier if you go just a little lighter, like a dark brown -"

Sören, however, didn't want to be coddled. He wanted to get to Akureyri. *This is my ticket home.* Sören focused again, this time seeing himself with golden blond hair - which he didn't think suited him at all, but the point wasn't to be pretty, it was to disguise himself. He pushed the mental image outward, and Maglor's eyebrows shot up. Once again, Maglor held out a lock of Sören's hair so he could inspect the difference.

However, Sören couldn't hold the hair color for very long. One change was enough to maintain, two at a time felt "tighter", the tension snapping.

"This was why I told you to start small," Maglor said when Sören's hair went back to its original black.

Sören shrugged. "It's sink or swim, innit?"

Maglor fed him another strawberry - even though the blond quickly faded out, he'd still accomplished it. Once again, Sören sucked the cream and juices from Maglor's fingers, then Maglor said, "Maybe if you only have one detail of your hair changed - like the length - and your other change is another part of your body, you might be able to hold the glamour longer."

Sören nodded. "Worth a shot."

"Eventually I *do* want you to practice being able to hold a change your hair length and color at the same time, *and* other changes in your appearance, for longer than a few minutes - it might save your life someday - but for now... little steps."

Sören grit his teeth; he wanted to be able to pull it all off at once, but he knew Maglor was right. He was going to have to work his way up, like training a muscle. This muscle was his magic. His power. Which still made him uncomfortable. But there was a difference between preying on innocent mortals, and a little illusion to help himself visit home. Or hide - he wondered bitterly how much glamour would have made a difference when the Balrogs were after them. If Frankie would still be alive now.

"*Focus*," Maglor said, seeming to sense Sören's mind was wandering, and to nowhere good. Their eyes locked. "OK, this time... see if you can make your tattoos disappear, or... the ones on your arms, anyway."

Sören balked. More than anything else about his appearance - his face, his eyes, his hair, even his piercings, his tattoos were the feature he was the most attached to. When he was four, he'd begun having recurring nightmares of burning to death, and after his suicide attempt he'd made art that later became the tattoo design he sported on his arms

and back - full sleeves of flames going up his right arm, ocean waves on his left arm, leading out to a fire and water phoenix on his back. The water was there to temper the fire; he'd made the art before he'd put together the puzzle of his past life, and he now understood that wasn't just symbolic but perhaps a subconsciously magical act, to keep himself from destructing with such big energy compressed into a smaller form.

Maglor knew, and reached out to take Sören's hand, and squeezed. "You know I love your ink, I'm not saying get rid of it permanently. This is to help you protect yourself -"

"Jæja." Sören hated sounding testy with Maglor. He wasn't annoyed with Maglor so much as he was annoyed that there was a need for this at all. He wished, and not for the first time, that he didn't have to jump through so many hoops of false identity just to live a normal life.

"Here." Maglor kissed the tip of his nose, then he gently pushed Sören onto his back. "I'll make this worth your while, with a bonus treat."

Sören raised an eyebrow.

Maglor placed two strawberries and a heaping dollop of whipped cream on Sören's right nipple, then held out a strawberry, just out of reach. Sören laughed, knowing the "bonus treat" would be Maglor's tongue. Then he sobered - he didn't like this, but once again he wondered if this would be necessary someday to protect the life of his children. Sören ran a nervous hand through his curls, even though he couldn't feel the extra length, and he took a deep breath.

He pictured himself with arms bare, no ink - no scars that the ink covered - just skin. As he took his hand away from his head he watched the ink dissolve on his arm, and he jumped. Even when he was expecting it, he was still startled.

"Very, very good. And now... try to hold it, even as you're being distracted." With a wicked smile, Maglor leaned down and took a bite of strawberry, then another, then another, the movement teasing Sören's nipple. Teased even more as Maglor lapped up the cream and juices, suckled and lapped some more. Sören's breath hitched and for a second a "ghost" of the tattoos flickered on his arms, but Sören pushed again and his arms were once again bare.

Maglor fed Sören the strawberry he was holding, and this time Sören didn't just lick Maglor's fingers but the palm of his hand, before sucking Maglor's fingers, eyes locked.

They kissed, and Maglor spoke into Sören's mind. *Hold it. Nice and steady.*

Sören still pushed, but this time it felt like the pushing was from a place in the back of his mind, like trying to play cards while watching a movie. When the kiss broke, Sören's arms were still bare. Maglor stroked Sören's face.

"One more," Maglor said, "and then we can continue this lesson another time."

"OK."

"This time I want you to... change the ink. Again, not permanently. Instead of wiping it off, transform it into something else, different tattoos."

Somehow, that bothered Sören even more than the challenge to make them disappear, but he reminded himself he was doing this for a reason. It took Sören a moment to try to

think of a new design and then it came to him. Sören watched his arms as green, thorny vines spread over them. He extended it all the way to his back - a Tree of Life like the one Frankie once had, but also green like the vines.

The World Tree that Odin hung upon when he "took up the runes".

Sören sat up, and gestured for Maglor to come around and look at his back. Maglor hugged him tight and kissed him hard, before rocking him, laughing and crying. "You did it. Holy shit, you did it."

Sören sighed and patted him. "Can I have my ink back now?"

"You may... and you can have a treat, too."

That treat was Maglor pushing Sören back down and loading two strawberries and a pile of cream onto Sören's left nipple. Sören's cock jolted at the feel of Maglor's tongue cleaning him, teasing him. Sören let out a breathy moan as Maglor suckled. Then Maglor sat Sören up, and held out a strawberry. Sören took a bite, and Maglor took the other bite, finishing it; he grabbed Sören's face and they kissed, sharing the strawberry and cream between them, tongues licking playfully and sensually when the strawberry was gone, savoring the lingering sweetness.

"Break time now," Maglor husked. He got up, picked Sören up from the floor, and carried him - using the Force to move the bowl with the remaining strawberries over to the bed. Once Maglor put Sören on the bed, he got out of his jeans and boxer-briefs.

They took turns feeding each other strawberries, licking and sucking the whipped cream and strawberry juice from each other's fingers. Some cream and juice spilled onto Sören's throat and chest and Maglor cleaned it with long, slow, deliberate strokes of his tongue. Then Maglor once again put strawberries on Sören's nipples, eating them off, suckling them clean... pulling on the nipple rings with his teeth before lapping at them, sucking harder. Sören shoved Maglor down on his back, and arranged the last few strawberries in a trail leading down from Maglor's chest to his stomach, just above the hard cock pressed against his belly. Sören ate the strawberries slowly, sensually, coming up with each one to kiss Maglor, sharing the strawberry with him, before diving back down. When the strawberries were gone, Sören poured out the dregs of juice and cream over Maglor's cock and began to suck him very, very slowly, relishing the way Maglor groaned, arching to him, panting. Maglor yanked on Sören's curls and Sören moaned around the cock in his mouth, his own cock jolting.

Sören pulled Maglor's cock out of his mouth and tapped it against his tongue, making streamers with the precum. He licked up and down the shaft, slowly, then lapped at it faster, bathing it with his tongue. He licked at the head before sucking on just the tip, rubbing his tongue as he sucked. Maglor's moans got louder, and Sören's balls twinged at the sight of Maglor completely lost in pleasure.

Sören took the cock out of his mouth again and his tongue lashed the frenulum, knowing how sensitive it was. "This is my favorite reward."

"I can tell." Maglor grabbed Sören's curls again, pulling him up. "I want to taste you, too."

They kissed, and then they got in position, laying on their sides in a sixty-nine. They sucked each other slowly and languidly at first, teasing, then they sucked harder, faster, hungry for each other, grabbing each other's heads and thrusting into each other's mouths, moans louder and louder. Maglor played with Sören's balls, gently massaging

them, and Sören's finger circled the rim of Maglor's opening before pushing inside. Sören found the sweet spot right away and fingered him, making Maglor whimper around the cock in his mouth. One finger became two, and Maglor clutched at Sören desperately.

I'm going to come, Maglor warned him.

Give it to me. I want every drop.

Maglor cried out with his mouth full, flooding Sören's mouth with his sweet, hot cum. There was so much of it Sören almost choked on it, and Maglor coming in his mouth set off Sören's own release. Sören swallowed Maglor's cum and gasped for breath as the pleasure overtook him, pulsing with euphoria. Sören sighed deeply and curled his toes, feeling like he was sinking, then flying, burning up in a blaze of glory like the phoenix on his back.

Maglor pulled Sören against his chest, held him tight, and began petting Sören's curls, rocking him. "I love you."

"I love you too." Sören snuggled into him and sighed again, savoring that full-body relief, melting bliss.

For awhile they lay there, nuzzling, petting, giving each other tender little kisses, then the kisses were longer, lingering... until at last their tongues were playing together again. Sören's cock rose, and so did Maglor's. Their cocks rubbed together as Maglor's hands roamed over Sören's back and ass. Maglor began kissing Sören's neck, and then surprised Sören by leaning in to trace the ocean waves on his left arm with his tongue, then moving to the right arm and licking the flames. Sören moaned, exquisitely sensitized. Maglor pulled back from Sören, rolled him onto his ass, and did the same with the phoenixes on his back, his tongue driving Sören wild with teasing pleasure. When Maglor had traced the entire piece, he kissed down Sören's spine, fingers walking in the wake of his tongue. Sören shivered and swore in Icelandic, gripping the pillows tight as each kiss sent fire and lightning through his body.

Maglor went lower, and when his tongue pushed inside Sören cried out. Maglor's wicked tongue knew just what Sören liked, lapping away until Sören was bucking his hips, fucking himself on Maglor's tongue, panting, begging "Please, god, please, fuck me..."

Maglor made him beg for awhile, and when he relented, he paused to wipe his cock with sanitizing wipes before getting the lube. At the look Sören gave him, Maglor said, "Well, I had to make sure there isn't any strawberry stuff still up there. Just because you're immortal now doesn't mean hygiene isn't important."

Sören facepalmed and shook with laughter, something about that hit his funny bone just the right way. Maglor laughed too - then they stopped laughing when Maglor poured lube over his cock and worked it in by stroking himself slowly, giving Sören a show. Sören groaned and rolled over to stroke himself too, not able to help himself, going out of his mind with lust.

Maglor lay back against the pillows and pulled Sören atop him. Sören straddled Maglor's hips and sank down. When they were fully joined they kissed. Maglor held Sören tight as he bounced away, riding Maglor like a wild bull, both men panting, gasping. Sören was almost terrified by his own frenzied need, but this was an act of love, an all-consuming fire. They had been lost, then found, and each coupling celebrated their return, reinforced the strength they had together... was an act of defiance of the Doom. In moments like this they could forget tears unnumbered, finding a place of ecstasy.

"I love you," Maglor said. He kissed Sören's nipples, down Sören's side, back up to Sören's neck. "I love you, Ada. Love you..."

"*Elskan.*" Sören grabbed Maglor's face and kissed him hard. He was right there, at the point of no return, ready to explode again. *Come with me*, Sören spoke into his mind.

They came together, moaning into the kiss, holding each other as tight as they could as Sören's seed sprayed Maglor's chest and Maglor spent into his pulsing walls. There was only Flame and Song, a microcosm of the Big Bang, stars and light.

Sören curled up on him, feeling perfectly at peace... and before he could doze off, Maglor's cell phone chimed. Sören raised an eyebrow and made a sleepy grumble as Maglor reached for the phone and checked his text messages.

"It's Ali," he explained. "She knew I needed some time with you, and it's been awhile so she wants to know if everyone can come back from the pool now."

"Yeah, that's OK."

Maglor patted Sören's ass. "This has been a very promising first lesson. I have every confidence you'll be able to glamour yourself at least as well as I can by the time your birthday gets here." Maglor leaned in to give Sören a little kiss. "I want you to be able to see Iceland for your birthday, Ada. I know how much that means to you."

Sören sighed and nodded.

Maglor walked Sören back to his suite, where Anthony was waiting. Once Dag was in bed, Sören gave Anthony the rundown of what he'd been up to while everyone else was at the pool, and then couldn't resist a brief demonstration, turning his hair blond for thirty seconds to tease the reincarnated Finarfin.

"You look utterly ludicrous," Anthony said. He smirked. "I'd still do you with that hair, though."

"We could be ludicrous together. You should probably learn how to glamour yourself, too." Sören snickered at the mental image. "Like a blond mullet."

Anthony facepalmed, but shook with silent laughter before he used the Force to swat Sören's ass with a pillow. Then he pulled Sören close and kissed him. "Here. I think it's time to distract you from horrible ideas."

"Some hot dork on dork action?"

"You're damn right." Anthony smacked Sören's ass, and then he leaned in, kissed Sören's neck, and purred, "I want to taste his cum inside you."

Sören groaned - his cock leapt right up at that - and he quickly shucked his clothing to sit on Anthony's face. Anthony's talented tongue was another reward, teasing inside him until Sören was riding his face, fucking himself on Anthony's tongue, panting, not able to help a little moan as Anthony slapped his ass.

It had been a good day. One that could make him almost hope the worst was over.

Chapter 9

Sören's breath caught as he looked out over the view of the mountains and the fjord and the bay, and the big, seemingly endless bright blue sky with fluffy white clouds. Those clouds felt close enough to touch, here on top of Súlor.

Despite having lived much of his life in Akureyri, this was Sören's first time going to the top of Súlor. Before immortality, Sören had been asthmatic, which made things like mountain climbing an unsafe challenge. Now, he was free, and here on his forty-eighth birthday, he was doing something he'd always wanted to do.

Sören wasn't alone - he'd brought Dag to visit Akureyri for their birthday, and they were accompanied by Dooku. Anthony had gotten to go on the trip to Toronto, so it was Dooku's turn, heeding the caution that the three Finwioni should avoid traveling together until their enemies were dealt with, to avoid another incident like the Balrog attack. Sören wished Anthony was here to see this, but now that he'd learned to glamour himself thanks to Maglor's help, there would be more opportunities to go back to Akureyri and do this again.

They could have used the mini-portal to just come in at the top of the mountain, once they'd determined there was nobody else up there, but Sören wanted to climb, after not having been able to do so... and Dooku enjoyed the idea as well, now that he was free from arthritis. At the end of November, Iceland only saw four hours of sunlight a day, and already it was close to golden hour; Sören and Dooku wanted to watch the sunset together on top of the mountain before they headed down.

Sören took some water from his pack, stretched, sat down, and drank. After another moment of pacing around the summit and taking in the view from different angles, Dooku also sat next to Sören. Sören passed the bottle of water over, and when Dooku sipped, Sören shook his head and laughed.

"What." Dooku glared.

"Oh, just... your disguise." Sören sighed. "Which isn't really."

Dag had aged enough that even though he'd been on television and YouTube, he wasn't likely to be recognized, so he wasn't using glamour. As for Sören and Dooku, they had glamourised themselves to be on the safe side. Sören had aged himself up, turning his curls and his beard grey, and his eyes blue, but because eyes seemed to be the hardest to change, Sören "cheated" by putting a patch over his left eye, and wore a floppy hat to further obscure his face. He also decided to dress all in grey to blend in and fade, moreso than wearing all black would do. Dooku had aged himself down and glamourised away his beard, turned his hair its original pre-grey black, and made his eyes blue. While the blue eyes were not the startling, blue-flame color of his original Noldo past life, he otherwise looked very much like Fingolfin. It seemed less like the illusion of glamour and more like a revealing.

Dooku gave a cryptic smile as he handed the water back to Sören. "Consider it a birthday gift."

Sören leaned in and kissed the tip of his nose. "You're gorgeous either way, but yes, it's a good look for you."

Sören glanced over at Dag, expecting his brother to make some sort of smartass remark about getting diabetes, like Dag had once been wont to do, but then he reminded himself things had changed, Dag's trauma had made him a lot more serious. Dag also wasn't looking at them at all, but just standing close to the edge, looking out over the bay, arms folded, no expression on his face. For a brief instant Sören worried Dag, with his trauma, would throw himself off the edge of the mountain, and that thought terrified him, but before he could get up to pull his brother away from the edge, Dag turned and walked, slowly, carefully observing the view. Sören exhaled with relief.

Dooku spoke into Sören's mind. *As you know, not every person with PTSD is suicidal. You have it too.*

That's different. I wasn't imprisoned and tortured for twelve years, or turned into a living weapon. Sören shuddered, trying not to conjure mental images of Dag's time in captivity.

And yet, he came back to his family. His children. He has things to live for Dooku took Sören's gloved hand and squeezed it. *If I'd thought he was a danger to himself, I wouldn't have allowed you to bring him on the trip.*

Sören nodded. He looked back at Dag, now touched by golden light, which seemed appropriate for the one who had been Finrod so long ago.

When they finished the bottle of water, Sören and Dooku got up and walked around the summit together, hand-in-hand, enjoying the golden light. They stood arm-in-arm as the blue sky was painted with the first wisps of sunset - streaks of pink and orange. At last the entire sky blazed, red orange and gold with patches of lavender, magenta, sapphire and violet. Sören's breath caught and tears filled his eyes. Never in the twelve years since he'd had to stop painting to not connect the dots to his real identity, had Sören felt a stronger urge to paint. The bay looked like it was made of fire. In the breeze, Sören's curls stirred, blowing into his face, and Sören saw from the black color, instead of grey, that he was emotional enough to accidentally drop his glamour, but they were alone up here and he didn't care. Sören wished there was some way to preserve this moment of glory, like the Silmarils had captured the light of love Fëanor and his brothers shared.

Sören's eyes met Dag's and for the briefest instant Dag's eyes were light, clear blue. Sören's head instinctively snapped back and he blinked, startled... then Dag's eyes were back to their usual greenish grey, the same color their mother's eyes had been.

Sören tried not to dwell on it, figuring it was a trick of the light with the intense colors of the sunset. He refocused and got lost in the sky again, watching the colors spread and blend. As the sunset began to fade to more muted tones, Sören, Dag and Dooku took their headlamps out of their packs, put them back on, and began the trek down the mountain.

Sunset became twilight, and twilight became night. Out here in the mountains, the Milky Way was visible, and Sören teared up again as the stars blanketed the sky, innumerable, infinite. "Dag, look at that," he said in a hushed voice. When they were small children, they'd had a nightly ritual of going outside to look at the stars - the light pollution in Akureyri had been a bit less in the 1980s - and that nightly ritual had set the path for Dag to go into astrophysics. The night sky was clearer out here than it was even on the farm in the Australian outback.

"Jæja," Dag said, his tone flat, not pausing but continuing to climb down the trail.

Sören huffed with mild frustration. Immediately, he got angry with himself for bristling with

irritation at Dag, and tightened the shield around his mind, envisioning plate glass, not wanting Dag to pick up on it and feel guilty. Sören knew logically that there were valid reasons for Dag's unresponsiveness. The first and most obvious was that they were descending a steep, rocky mountain trail at night in winter. They had headlamps, but there was still need for caution. Sören also knew that Dag couldn't return to his old profession, both because his anxiety made dealing with the public difficult, and because Dag's return from twelve years held by the Americans and Russians would cause too much of a media circus, and potentially trigger an international powder keg. Sören knew if the situation was reversed, he'd be bitter about it and would probably have a hard time dealing with anything involving space.

Nonetheless, Dag's lack of reaction still bothered him. It felt "off", one more thing in a growing list of things that weren't quite right. And Sören hated that, not wanting to judge his brother when he'd been imprisoned and lost so much of himself in those years.

Sören looked around to focus on something else - not the sky, now that he was feeling somewhat bitter his brother couldn't enjoy it with him on their birthday - and his vision fell on a cairn. They had seen that same cairn going up the mountain, but Sören had been too caught up in getting his body up the mountain, making sure Dag was all right on the climb and not overdoing it, and too caught up in marvelling at the brilliant sky, to notice much - the snow-capped rocks just all seemed to blend together. But now, in the bright glare of his headlamp, Sören observed something curious - there was no snow on the cairn; everything else had at least a dusting of snow, if not a thick coat of it. The cairn wasn't simply untouched by snow, but there were lichens growing lush and greenish-blue.

Sören found himself coming a little closer, strangely compelled... and then the ground began to shake. Sören faceplanted in the snow; Dooku caught Dag as he fell to his knees. Sören watched as the rocks trembled, the snow quivering... and suddenly there was a crack in the ground in front of the cairn.

Sören watched as a sword rose from the jagged hole in the earth, up and up and up... and flew into Dooku's waiting hand. Sören pulled himself to his feet, barely able to breathe as he saw Dooku - still glamoured young, strongly resembling Fingolfin - holding a sword with a blade that looked like it was made of ice, sparkling in the light of the headlamps.

Sören blinked and took a step back - he almost fell over again and Dag caught him. "Easy," Dag said.

Sören's mouth opened and he pointed with a shaking finger. He came closer and touched the sword to make sure it was real and he wasn't just hallucinating - he couldn't be so sure after Dag's eyes had appeared blue for a few seconds, even though he was sure that was just the light of the sunset. Even through his glove, the blade of the sword burned - not hot, but cold, a freezing burn like he'd touched dry ice with his bare hand. Yes, metal would be cold out here on the snowy mountain, but this was a deeper cold. Unnatural.

Supernatural.

Sören couldn't speak, only give a hysterical little howl as memories flooded his mind's eye. Fëanor forging the perfect sword for his brother, not just the skill of his hands but the skill of his magic, attuning it for Fingolfin alone, Fingolfin's energy, Fingolfin's power. *The cold fire of the stars under which our people Awakened... the fire of ice. We balance and complete each other.* He saw the metal turning crystalline, gleaming like ice, like diamond, felt the blade freezing, colder and colder, cold beyond cold.

Then he looked back into the present, the ancient relic in Dooku's hand.

Dooku smiled and made a fencing salute. "As you know, I have found Ringil."

Chapter 10

*"Happy birthday to you,
happy birthday to you.
Happy birthday, Dag and Sören.
Happy birthday to you."*

Dag and Sören leaned over their birthday cake - a unicorn farting a rainbow, the rainbow lit with forty-eight small white candles - and blew. The candles flickered but didn't go out. Sören facepalmed; he'd used trick candles on so many cakes for other people that he should have seen it coming for him.

"Flame Imperishable indeed," Dooku said.

Sören stuck his tongue out then huffed harder. Finally the candles went out, and Sören made a face at the brief acrid burnt stench. Anthony began cutting cake, giving the first piece to Dag. "A smaller piece for me than that," Sören said, eyeing the generous portion on Dag's plate. Sören had requested a "we hate adulting" themed party and he'd filled up on bean-and-cheese nachos, pepperoni pizza bagels, mini crescent dogs, dinosaur-shaped chicken nuggets, curly fries, and Dooku's insistence of having a vegetable platter with dip for "something healthy". Elanora and Junior had themselves insisted on making fairy bread, an Australian tradition, so Sören had plenty of that too. He felt like he was going to pop if he had more sweets.

Not enough to keep from grabbing a fresh 20-oz bottle of Mountain Dew from the cooler on his way back to the blanket fort that had been assembled for the "we hate adulting" party. Both Maglor and Dooku made disapproving grunts at the radioactive green drink. Sören smiled back and raised his bottle in salute.

Both Sören and Dag had requested that people not make a big deal out of presents - Sören, in particular, had just about everything he wanted and the things he wanted the most, like Morgoth's head on a pike, couldn't be delivered so easily. While Sören indulged the kids, he still felt mildly uncomfortable with luxury for himself, after having spent much of his life poor, and especially now with so many climate refugees he felt like people should be donating to charity instead of spending money on him. Nonetheless, Sören and Dag had each received a few small gifts earlier that day, and now Junior came forward with his hands behind his back.

"Oh no." Sören threw back his head and laughed. "I told you not to spend money -"

"I made something."

Junior had begun helping his father in the forge when he was nine - Sören had felt he was a bit young for it, but Junior had insisted, much like Curufin... much like baby Fëanor... and so Sören had relented. Junior was careful enough that so long as he stuck to small, minor projects, he was allowed to work in the forge with minimal supervision, meaning an adult had to be there in case something went wrong but they could casually observe from a distance; Anthony and Ali had done "forge duty" reading or playing a game on the bench while Sören was doing chores or errands.

Junior presented Sören with something palm-sized wrapped in blue tissue paper. Sören found a piece of iron, shaped into a troll cross. Allegedly from medieval Sweden and Norway, it was said to be a protective amulet, though it was more likely a house mark.

Whether its use as an amulet was ancient or wholly modern, it was the intent that made the magic. Sören got choked up at his son's desire to protect him. Sören tried not to show his trauma to his kids, he tried to be strong for them, but he had also not sugarcoated that Junior's mother had been killed by their enemies, who were still out there. Junior doing what he could to give his father something he thought would lend magical protection broke Sören's heart, and he blinked back tears. He held out his arms, too overwhelmed to make words, letting the hug speak for him as Junior threw his arms around him.

Continuing to hold his son with one arm, Sören brought the hand holding the troll cross closer to his face so he could get a better look. It was a simple design, but elegant in its simplicity, and Junior had done a good job of smoothing the metal. Sören ran his thumb around the curved knot and its arms, flipped it over to look at the back, then over again, running his thumb over and over it. "This is really nice."

"You don't think it's too plain?"

"Oh, god no." Sören tousled Junior's hair and slapped his back. "Not everything needs a lot of detail. You did a good job."

Junior smiled. "I'm glad you like it."

"I do. I love it. Actually..." Sören stroked his chin. While the rational, scientific part of him that had once almost been a doctor still balked at it, he had learned over the last decade that magic was real, and he was holding a piece of it. Junior hadn't just done a good job of shaping the metal but Sören could feel the power gently radiating in the metal - Junior had put his protective intent into it, like a portable ward. "I think I'm going to get a thin leather rope and wear it as a necklace." Sören wasn't one for wearing jewelry, apart from his piercings - Fëanor had preferred to make jewelry for others rather than wearing it himself, the Silmarils had been the one exception and that less as an adornment and more as a way to honor the bond he and his brothers shared. But now, Sören felt like he needed to wear this, both to pay tribute to his son's budding gift, encouraging him, and also for a little extra protection.

Junior's face lit up, and Sören smiled back. They hugged again.

Sören still felt sentimental and a little choked up over his son's gift, so it felt like proper time for something else he was sentimental about, but with much more levity, needing to laugh before he ended up crying. Sören turned to Dag. "I have something else for you." Earlier, Sören had given Dag a traditional Icelandic sweater as a touch of home.

Dag raised an eyebrow.

Sören held his hands apart a few feet. "It's an invisible velociraptor."

Anthony's laughter rang out, and Sören wanted to laugh along with him, but Dag sat there looking utterly confused, and Sören's heart sank as the pit of his stomach rose. Once again, it didn't seem like Dag remembered something that was a big little thing - not a critical memory loss like one's name or not remembering who family members were - but this had nonetheless been a yearly tradition.

"You know we grew up poor," Sören explained to Anthony, "because Einar was always losing his job and he and Katrin drank their money away. Our birthday is close enough to Christmas that we usually didn't get anything. We didn't always get stuff for Christmas either, but if they made a half-assed effort for Christmas it came at the expense of our birthday. Anyway, Dag and I started giving each other invisible presents. The first year it

was an invisible bicycle and an invisible stereo... but then with each year the presents got more and more outrageous. Invisible yacht. Invisible unicorn." Sören wiped a tear from his eye. "Invisible Björk's swan dress."

"I see," Anthony said, glancing over with a concerned look at Dag.

Dag began to laugh in that hearty, forced way that let Sören know he didn't remember at all. Sören's heart beat faster, alarm bells going off in his head, but he didn't understand why. What was going on? What had the Americans or Russians done to him?

They made him use the Force to attack other people. Sören shuddered. Then a terrible thought: *After all these years with the trail cold, Dag presumed dead, suddenly MI6 found him. Wasn't that a little too easy? What if the bad guys wanted Dag to be found? What if they programmed Dag to hurt your family?*

Sören tightened the shield around his mind and squirmed in his seat. He tried desperately to shove the suspicious thoughts back, to bring himself back to the present... the kids playing "Pin the Tail on the Donkey"...

Sören remembered the blue eyes on the mountain. *That was just your eyes playing tricks on you with the sunset. That was nothing.* He hated even thinking about that, being suspicious - like maybe the Americans or Russians had programmed him, except that didn't explain the blue eyes. *Unless Dag isn't Dag.*

Sören's stomach lurched. He didn't want cake anymore. "Will you... excuse me? It's a bit too warm in here, I'm gonna get some air." Before anyone could respond, Sören put the troll cross in his jeans pocket, got up and tore off through the kitchen, banging out the kitchen door to the field.

What the fuck, you can't be thinking like this about your own brother. Sören took some deep breaths, trying to calm himself down - his hands were shaking. Then, the bitter voice in the back of his head, arguing with himself: *Of course you would think that. You demanded loyalty, oaths, and yet in the end you were a kinslayer. In the end you betrayed Fingolfin when you burnt the ships, of course you'd turn against your own blood all over again -*

"Enough," Sören told himself through gritted teeth, fists clenched.

Murderer, Sören's inner voice shot back.

The back door banged open and Anthony came right over, pulling Sören close, holding him tight. "Hey," Anthony husked. "Hey. I know."

Sören fell apart, sobbing into Anthony's shoulder. Hating himself for doubting his brother. Angry at whatever the Russians and Americans *did* to him over those twelve years *if Dag is really Dag*, Sören's paranoia added. Anthony's arms tightened around Sören and he stroked Sören's curls, rubbed his back. Sören felt Anthony's chest heaving and knew Anthony was crying a little too. Even though Anthony and Dag still hadn't really bonded yet - it was hard to do when Dag was like this - Sören knew the Finarfin part of Anthony grieved whatever had happened to Finrod. And Anthony could feel Sören's grief and rage and fear and that upset him, much as Sören was trying to keep himself shielded so his family didn't feel the empathic blowback.

"I hate this," Sören gritted out. "He doesn't remember. How the fuck does he not remember this..."

Anthony rocked him, pet him, made soothing noises through his own tears. "Shhhh, lovey. I know, sweetheart. I know."

Sören looked up and into those moss-green eyes, saw the love and compassion. Anthony stroked Sören's face and kissed his forehead, kissed the tip of his nose.

"Listen," Anthony said, "I'm gonna go ahead and schedule an MRI. The fastest I can get him in for a non-emergency is a week, maybe two, but I think it's time. I know we don't feel right about dragging him in for tests after what he went through but I don't think we really have a choice, with him not remembering... so much."

Sören nodded. He didn't like it either - his mind played images of Dag panicking and having a meltdown, trauma flashbacks of experiments - but he also knew they needed to see the extent of the brain damage.

Anthony went on, "Once the test results are in, and they assess the extent of the brain damage - which I'm sure he's got - then they can probably prescribe one of those cognitive enhancement drugs, like the kind dementia patients are given." He exhaled, and pursed his lips. "I make no false promises that we can fix this one hundred percent, but even a little progress is something, you know?"

Sören nodded again. And while it gave him some comfort that they were doing what they could do, they weren't completely helpless, he still felt a sense of dread, like they were dealing with something out of their control and he didn't know if drugs would really help or not.

If it's not Dag, then drugs won't help at all.

Sören swore under his breath - he *really* didn't want to be thinking like this, but once again his mind's eye replayed the brief instant Dag had blue eyes on the mountain. *Trick of the light*, Sören told himself. *Trick of the light*. His fists clenched again and he found himself pulling back, to steel himself, brace himself to put the question to bed. Once again their eyes met and Sören took a deep breath and said, "OK. Anthony. Please, *please* don't judge me for asking this..."

"But."

"But." Sören looked down at his Doc Martens, then up at the clear blue sky. "When your team retrieved Dag and brought him to The Shop... was a DNA test done?" He looked into Anthony's eyes again, knowing Anthony would tell him the truth. "Like, to prove it's him. I mean, he looks like Dag, an aged-up version, but -"

"We did a DNA test, Sören." Anthony put his hands on Sören's shoulders. "He passed. It's him. Yes, we also wanted to make sure on our ends. It was a bit odd that an oversight had been made on Russia's end when they'd been so careful for twelve years to keep that trail dead, so we needed to know we weren't falling into a trap with a surgically altered agent. DNA checked out."

Sören breathed a small sigh of relief. "OK."

Anthony held Sören again. "You're beating yourself up for wondering."

"I can't help it, Anthony. I trusted Freyr and Loki. I know you probably think I'm an idiot for having trusted Loki -"

Anthony kissed the top of Sören's head and squeezed him. "I think you were someone who wanted to believe in goodness, after all the ugly shit the world has thrown at you. I can't fault you for that. But no Sören, I don't think you should judge yourself for doubting. Like I said, we DNA tested him because we had to question if this was the real deal or if a living weapon had been unleashed on us. It's fair you would question this yourself, and I'm glad you asked."

"I feel like such a piece of shit. So disloyal. That's my brother. I know I should be more understanding, if I'd been held captive and treated like a lab rat for twelve years my mind would probably break too, and I think it's because my brother's so bloody brilliant, he's a fucking *physicist* for fuck's sake, that I can't deal with seeing him like this, having huge holes in his memory..."

Sören sobbed into Anthony's chest. Anthony rocked and pet him, crying a little himself, and when Sören had cried it out, Anthony cupped Sören's chin in his hand, lifted Sören's face, and kissed his tears. Then he picked Sören up off the ground, threw Sören over his shoulder caveman-style, and began walking to the forge, carrying him. "Come on. I think the birthday boy needs to unwrap some more presents."

—

Because of Sören's tendency to get lost in his work to the point of neglecting self-care - a holdover from his life as Fëanor - the forge workshop was set up like a small flat. There was a mini-fridge stocked with beverages and snack food, a bathroom with a toilet, sink, and shower, and a back room with a mattress and pillows making a nest area so Sören could just crash instead of having to walk all the way to the house to sleep. Of course, the nest area hadn't been used exclusively for sleeping, sometimes when one of Sören's partners came to check on him, they ended up staying awhile for sex.

Anthony and Sören undressed each other and got in the shower, kissing, sensually lathering each other's bodies, hard cocks rubbing together. As Anthony pushed Sören up against the shower wall, kissing Sören's sensitive neck and shoulder, Sören's mind finally let up with worrying about Dag, not able to think, only feel. Only need.

Anthony dropped down to his knees and kissed down Sören's stomach, then took Sören's cock in his mouth, their eyes locked. Sören held onto Anthony's shoulders to steady himself, trembling as the filthy sweetness of Anthony's mouth worked its wicked magic, sucking slowly, teasing. After a few minutes Anthony pulled the cock out of his mouth and licked up and down the shaft, aching slowly, then lapped at the head, tapped it against his tongue, sucked at the head then licked it some more, as he played with Sören's balls.

Anthony got up, turned Sören around, took Sören's arms and pressed Sören's hands against the shower wall, then gave Sören's ass a playful smack before he dropped back down to his knees and began to lick around and around the rim of Sören's passage. Sören whimpered and howled as Anthony's tongue fluttered inside him, teasing him even more, rubbing-rubbing-rubbing that sweet spot yet release glimmered just out of reach. Every now and again Anthony slapped Sören's ass, groaning into him. Sören found himself rocking his hips, fucking himself on Anthony's tongue, moaning, before Anthony smacked Sören's ass again, harder, and came up, arms around Sören's waist, kissing, licking and nibbling the side and back of Sören's neck and the back of his shoulder, Anthony's hard cock rubbing in the crack of Sören's ass.

Sören cried out when Anthony bit the sensitive hollow of his neck and shoulder. Then Anthony spun Sören back around, sucked on Sören's lower lip, and nipped it hard enough to draw blood. Sören tasted the metallic tang of his blood on Anthony's mouth as they kissed. Anthony's hands slid down Sören's chest and back up, thumbs playing with Sören's pierced nipples as Anthony used the Force to turn off the water.

They kissed their way out of the shower, and toweled each other off. They walked out of the steamy bathroom just in time to see Maglor and Dooku enter the forge; Dooku was carrying the black leather leash and collar Sören had bought some years ago, when they still lived in Iceland.

"Good, thanks for coming," Anthony said, grinning at them, letting Sören know he'd invited them via telepathy.

"Not yet, but we will be," Maglor quipped.

Sören laughed and shook his ass at them.

The three men followed Sören into the back room, and Maglor and Dooku got undressed. But then Sören relinquished the lead over to them, kneeling on the mattress - he saw the collar and leash and some submission was just what he needed right now, to get out of his head for awhile. Dooku sat on the bed and quietly clipped the collar around Sören's neck, then fit the leash to the collar. They looked into each other's eyes for a moment and Dooku tenderly stroked Sören's cheek, traced Sören's lips with his thumb...

...just before roughly grabbing Sören and pulling Sören over his knee.

"As you know, you are forty-eight this year, and there are three of us, so you get sixteen spankings from each of us," Dooku said.

"OK, Count," Sören teased, never able to resist taking a shot at his husband's aristocratic background.

Dooku's hand came down hard on Sören's ass. Sören's cock jumped. With the next slap, Sören's hole twitched. Each slap, with Dooku counting in that deep velvet voice, made Sören's cock throb, the sweet sting of the slap radiating through his entire body, wanting to be fucked hard, manhandled, ravaged. Sören rubbed himself against Dooku's thigh, panting, whimpering; Dooku rubbed Sören's back with one hand as he swatted Sören's ass with the other, his touch electric.

All too soon it was over, and then Anthony sat and led Sören onto his lap. Sören's ass was already sore, and Anthony was a harder hitter from years of military-level physical conditioning. Sören cried out with each blow, almost too hard, but so good, going deeper and deeper into that place where pain was transmuted to pleasure, surrendering.

Finally it was Maglor's turn. Maglor pulled Sören's curls with one hand, spanking with the other. Sören began grinding Maglor's knee insistently, urgently, loving it. He loved it even more when Maglor teased him by letting a finger circle around the outside of his passage, sliding down to caress the sensitive place between balls and ass, before his hand came back to slap Sören's stinging ass cheek. "Such a pretty shade of red," Maglor purred. "That's always been your color."

When it was done, Maglor produced a tube of aloe vera gel. With Sören's immortality he was a speed healer, but they'd hit his ass hard enough that it would smart for at least a little while, and now Maglor was as gentle as he'd been rough, rubbing Sören's ass in slow

circles as he applied the salve. Anthony pet Sören's curls, and Sören sucked on the fingers of Anthony's free hand. He looked up at Anthony expectantly, wanting something else to suck.

Maglor patted Sören's ass. "Get on the middle of the bed on all fours," he instructed.

Sören did as he was told, and Dooku ruffled Sören's curls like he was an obedient pet before taking the leash and tying it to one of the legs of the tray table Sören kept by the bedside.

Maglor got on his knees behind Sören, while Anthony and Dooku watched. Sören gasped at the cool lubricant poured down his crack, dripping into his passage, and gasped again, louder, as Maglor began to tease, the bulb of his cock at Sören's entrance, just the tip, pushing in just a little, then out, rubbing around it, up and down, then in again ever so slightly. Sören whined and his fists grabbed the sheets as he backed his ass up against Maglor, rubbing against him, desperate to be filled, taken.

Maglor kept teasing, until Sören was begging, "Please, please, *please*, **PLEASE**." Maglor gave an exaggerated sigh, grabbed Sören's hips, and began to push inside. They both cried out when Maglor was all the way in, buried to the hilt, then Maglor started thrusting, fast and furious, their hips and balls smacking together.

Anthony got on his knees in front of Sören, his hard cock in Sören's face. He grabbed Sören by the curls and Sören sucked down his cock, hungry for it, moaning with his mouth full. For a moment their eyes held, Anthony gently thrusting into Sören's mouth, Sören bobbing up and down, suctioning away, and then Dooku came over and Sören watched as Anthony and Dooku kissed, running their hands over each other. Anthony's left hand wrapped around Dooku's hard cock and stroked it as Dooku's hands continued wandering over Anthony's body, the two men kissing deeply. Sören went out of his mind with lust, fueled hotter by the delicious rubbing of Maglor's cock inside him.

Then Dooku reached out and played with Sören's hard, dripping cock. The pleasure got more and more intense, until Sören was shaking, whimpering around the cock in his mouth. Maglor slapped Sören's ass, knowing he was close. "You're not allowed to come until we say so," Maglor said. He smacked Sören's ass again, harder, making Sören cry out around Anthony's cock. "Not allowed to come until we've all had you."

The thought of all three of them taking turns inside him... Sören shuddered, almost coming without permission just from that thought. He rocked his hips back at Maglor, fucking himself on Maglor's cock, and Maglor sped up, their hips slapping louder. Anthony groaned into Dooku's kiss as Sören sucked for all he was worth, and when Dooku began to kiss and lick Anthony's neck, playing with Anthony's nipples, Anthony let out that telltale shuddery gasp and tensed just before he filled Sören's mouth with hot, sweet cream. Sören gulped it down with a high-pitched whine, so close, desperately aching to come, but obediently staying under their control, holding back. Two thrusts later Maglor came with a hoarse shout, and Sören moaned at the feel of Maglor's seed spilling inside him.

Maglor rested for a moment as Sören licked Anthony's cock clean. Anthony and Dooku shared one last kiss, then Anthony patted Dooku and walked around the side of the bed as Maglor pulled out. Anthony needed to recharge before he could go again, and he did it by diving down and eating Maglor's cum out of Sören. Dooku and Maglor began to kiss and caress each other while Sören watched - Maglor's cock rose to life again and they rubbed their cocks together, driving Sören wild. When Anthony started moaning into Sören's passage, Sören knew Anthony was ready, and looked over his shoulder. "Fucking take it," Sören panted.

"Oh, you think you're in charge, do you?" Anthony smacked Sören's ass, and then he resumed licking, much more slowly this time.

Anthony licked the space between Sören's balls and ass, making Sören howl, then Anthony drew Sören's balls in his mouth and sucked on them. He teased and teased, licking and sucking at Sören's balls, licking the gap, gently lapping Sören's channel until Sören was a quivering, sobbing wreck.

Anthony finally laughed, kissed and nipped at one of Sören's ass cheeks, and got behind Sören on his knees. Once Anthony filled Sören up, Dooku's cock was in Sören's mouth, and Dooku and Maglor continued making out, caressing and groping each other, Dooku stroking Maglor's cock, Maglor teasing Sören's cock, as Anthony drove into Sören harder and harder. Once again they brought Sören to that edge, pleasure built to the shatterpoint, but denied him release, tension climbing higher, so tight Sören felt he could die of it, but at the same time couldn't get enough, taking all they had to give, wanting more.

Anthony leaned down, his hairy chest against Sören's back, and he began kissing and licking Sören's neck. When he sped up, slamming into Sören as hard as he could go, biting Sören's neck and shoulder, Sören almost came. Anthony wrapped an arm around Sören, grabbed Sören's curls to pull him off Dooku's cock, and turned Sören's head and kissed him deeply, tasting Dooku's precum. Then Anthony shivered, groaning into the kiss, and Sören whimpered as he felt Anthony explode inside him. Anthony and Sören licked at Dooku's precum-dripping cock together, then their tongues rubbed together playfully, sensually before they kissed again.

It was Dooku's turn, who hadn't come yet. He briefly untied Sören's leash from the table, and reclined against the pillows, half-sitting, half-laying. He held Sören's leash and tugged Sören towards him. Sören straddled Dooku's lap. "Hi, Daddy," he said, coming closer for a kiss.

"Hello, sweetheart." Dooku kissed him back, and smiled up at him adoringly.

With his passage slick and sloppy from Anthony's cum, Sören sank down on Dooku's cock. Dooku wrapped his arms around Sören, holding him tight, holding him close, and Sören threw his arms around Dooku's neck and kissed him hard as he began to bounce. Next to them, Anthony and Maglor kissed, stroking each other's cocks, glancing over between kisses to watch the show of Sören riding Dooku like a wild bull, kissing hungrily, Sören panting and moaning as Dooku kissed Sören's neck, leaned down to lap and suckle Sören's hard nipples.

Sören ran his hands over Dooku's chest and stomach, enjoying the sight and feel of the silvery man fur, before hugging him again, kissing some more. Sören and Dooku looked back at Anthony and Maglor, making out, jerking each other's cocks, and moaned together appreciatively before kissing some more.

They got closer, closer, until Sören and Dooku had their foreheads pressed together, panting in the same rhythm, breathing each other's breath, both of them *right there*, one pleasure, one need, their Force bond so strong in that moment it was as if they didn't know where one ended and the other began. Then Dooku touched Sören's mind.

Come with me, Fëanáro.

They took each other's hands and let go, crying out together as Sören's seed splattered

Dooku's chest and Dooku spent and spent into him. Maglor and Anthony came at the same time, spraying them with cum, painting Sören's face and body. Sören loved it, his laughter ringing out, feeling utterly claimed, *theirs*. The long buildup, being edged so intensely, made for a powerful release, Sören feeling like he was soaring higher with each contraction, dizzying joy.

"Thank you," Sören said, smiling so hard his face hurt. "Oh, god. Thank you. Thank you. I love you. I love you."

"We love you." Dooku pulled Sören close, into his chest. Sören sighed and flexed his fingers and toes like a contented cat as he felt the thunder of Dooku's heartbeat, calming into lulling rain.

Then Maglor and Anthony were cuddling with them too, a tangle of limbs, cozy and warm and safe. This was exactly what he needed, to feel the strength of them together, the unbreakable bond across ages, leading them back to each other, getting them through this so far.

Sören drifted off, and was roused back awake when Maglor got up and started getting dressed.

"You OK?" Sören mumbled. "Something wrong?"

"Huan has to go out."

"You brought Huan?" Sören hadn't seen the dog come in. Then he facepalmed, feeling like an idiot - Maglor had extremely sensitive hearing, so if Huan was scratching to get out in the house, Maglor could hear it. That, and Maglor had a Force bond with his dog, so either way...

Sören sat up. As cozy as it was to lay there with Dooku and Anthony, it was also a little too warm now - Sören was like a living furnace - and he needed air. He quickly got dressed and followed Maglor outside. They got Huan and began walking him around the farm, Sören admiring the neon orange sunset and the way it seemed to light the fields on fire.

Then Maglor paused, frowning. Sören also stopped in his tracks. Before he could ask what it was, he heard a faint buzzing in the distance. He looked in the direction of the sound and saw a drone flying over the fields.

Maglor folded his arms while Huan sniffed around.

"Apparently, the wards need to be tuned up again," Sören said.

"It doesn't make any sense," Maglor said, scratching his head. "The wards had held for a very long time before Nat came out a few months ago. They shouldn't be down again this soon."

A chill went down Sören's spine, an icy hand gripping his stomach. He swallowed hard. This was an ominous sign - it suggested something was tampering with the wards.

Or someone.

Chapter 11

The minute Ali was off the phone and stepped from the kitchen to the living room, Sören sprang to his feet, feeling like he was going to explode from the anticipation. "So?"

"He's coming," Ali said, nodding. "Tomorrow."

"Good." Sören breathed a sigh of relief. While he would have felt better if Uncle Nat came out to tune up the wards today, he also knew it was extremely short notice and Uncle Nat had things to do. Tomorrow was still generous - the sooner the better, Sören was afraid of what could possibly get in if they waited days, weeks.

"Well..." Ali used the Force to slip her phone into the cargo pocket of her khakis and then she gestured for Sören to sit down, between Anthony and Dooku. Just then, Maglor and Dag came in - they had taken Huan for a walk together; Sören encouraged Dag to spend time with the dog and get some "pet therapy". Ali gave Maglor a nervous look, and their eyes held like they were communicating something privately via telepathy, then Ali glanced at Dag. "I suppose we should have a family meeting."

"I'll go to the herb room to get your mum," Maglor said.

"Can you get Darren while you're out, too?"

Maglor nodded and patted Ali's shoulder on the way out.

Ali sat on the love seat and Dag took one of the armchairs, looking a bit ill at ease. Huan trotted over to Sören, Anthony and Dooku for pettings and made a whimper of concern.

"What's going on?" Dag asked, trying to sound nonchalant, but Sören heard the anxious note in his voice.

"I'll explain in a minute," Ali said.

Once Maglor brought Medika and Darren back, and everyone was seated, Ali cleared her throat. "Uncle Nat is coming to do the wards tomorrow early afternoon. He's going to need a ride here," she said, glancing over at Maglor.

"Yeah, that's fine." Maglor nodded.

Ali pursed her lips. "Uncle Nat says this is the last time he's coming out to do the wards for the next year."

"What!" Medika's eyebrows shot up. "He's not ill, I hope? He seemed well the last time I saw him, but I know he's getting on in years -"

Ali shook her head. "He didn't say anything about that, Mum. What he did say is..." Ali took a deep breath, leaned back in her seat, and folded her arms, looking disgruntled. "He shouldn't have to come out here to do the wards again when it's only November and he was last here in July. Those wards should hold up for years, not mere months, and..." Ali scratched her locks.

"He thinks something is tampering with the wards," Sören said, speaking aloud his own suspicion.

Ali nodded slowly. "Yeh. He says we need to deal with whatever it is, or his work is for nothing."

"Can he help us find the source?" Anthony asked.

"He can but he said it's better if we figure it out ourselves, he thinks we already have the wisdom and need to learn how to use it. He's not wrong, but it puts us in a bit of a bind because who the fuck knows how long it's going to take us to find out who or what is doing it." Ali folded her hands between her knees and looked around the room.

"I think it's safe to say it's a who," Maglor said. "We know Sauron and Morgoth are out there. They haven't messed with us since sending us the Balrogs twelve years ago, they're overdue for trying."

"It doesn't make any sense, though," Anthony said, frowning. "Yes, they're out there, yes, they want our blood just as much as we want theirs. But the wards were designed to keep away evil - they weren't able to get through them to spy on us or magically attack us all this time. Why now? What made them go down?"

"If you chip away at a thick wall with a hammer every day for twelve years, eventually you'll make a hole," Dag spoke up. "If they've been flinging... evil shit... in our direction every day for twelve years, that would finally do something to the wards."

That made sense, and yet it didn't. Sören knew easy answers could be correct ones, but nonetheless, this felt too easy. Like the sort of answer an enemy would want them to believe, to deflect what was really going on beneath the surface.

Sure, big brain. Are you going to put the Silmarils on your tinfoil hat?

Sören grunted, feeling annoyed with himself. But before he could get too caught up in once again internally berating himself for paranoia - paranoia he knew he couldn't help, with his trauma - Dag's eyes widened, feverish, and his voice rose with a note of hysteria. "Sören, we need to take your mini-portal, and go find Morgoth and Sauron." Dag's fists clenched. "We need to deal with them once and for all. We need to deal with them *now*."

"Whoa." Anthony put up both hands. "Whoa. Hold up."

Sören couldn't believe what he was hearing. Ever since Dag had returned from captivity, he had for the most part shown a very flat affect, barely reacting, barely expressing any emotions at all. This was the strongest emotion Sören had seen from him since the return. The intense urgency of Dag's plea to go after Morgoth and Sauron was a bit disturbing in its suddenness. Indeed, Dag seeming more vehement about wanting Morgoth and Sauron "dealt with" than even Fëanor himself was disturbing to as well.

"OK, listen," Anthony said, face and voice stern, almost angry. "Before MI6, I commanded a ballistic missile submarine, I held one of the four letters of last resort. So I speak with some experience here when I tell you *hell no*."

"What, you don't want Morgoth and Sauron dead?" Dag sneered.

"Of course I bloody do. But I don't want all of us dead to get there, and that's exactly what would happen." Anthony pursed his lips.

"He's right," Sören said, much as he was loath to admit it, hungry for his revenge against

the Jail Crow and his minion. "While I doubt the veracity of some statements Ingwion made, in hindsight, he told us he'd seen a world where we'd become gods, taken on Morgoth and Sauron in the Dagor Dagorath, and managed to destroy an entire universe."

"We all felt it in October 2020," Anthony said. Ali nodded.

"Indeed," Dooku said.

"We may have been re-awakening our old selves, we may have absorbed powers from the Norse gods when we fought them," Anthony went on - Sören noticed Dag's jaw set and his nostrils flared, like something about that statement infuriated him; Sören thought it was just the mention of the gods at all, since Odin had killed their father and mother - "but we're not ready. We haven't learnt enough about utilizing our own power. We're not prepared. We would be going on a suicide mission."

"I for one shan't repeat history again," Dooku said, "even though it seems Ringil has come back to me to eventually take on the Dark Lord. Morgoth is clever. We need to be more clever than he. That means having a plan. A carefully constructed plan, which will take time. A series of backup plans, which will take more time."

"He knows that and that's why he probably doesn't expect us to take him on now," Dag said, that note of hysteria back in his voice. "We'd have the element of surprise -"

"Unless you're right that twelve years of daily flinging magic at us broke the wards, in which case that looks like bait." Anthony narrowed his eyes.

"He's right." Sören thought of the stolen Silmarils. It wasn't just about the Silmarils, he understood now - powerful though those stones were, each carrying a spark of the Flame Imperishable. It was about the chaos and discord that would come of trying to retrieve the Silmarils. Morgoth wanted to keep them from ascending into power, overthrowing the Valar, so he had created a distraction, and if he gained a tiny piece of the Flame Imperishable out of it, so much the better.

"Eventually we *do* need to face him," Ali said, "but not now."

"We have to treat it like a military operation," Anthony said. "Training. Not just physical combat skills, but magic. Sharpening our skills with the Force like a blade. That's going to take time, and we have to be in the right place for it mentally. None of us are there right now."

"And the longer you wait, the more powerful he becomes, the more damage he'll do." Dag gave Sören a look of contempt and snorted. "What happened to you, anyway? The revolutionary, throwing caution to the wind. So defiant, standing against the gods. Acting spontaneously, on impulse, burning the ships. Facing the Dark Lord head-on."

"Jæja, that... kind of got me killed," Sören said, running a hand through his curls, rubbing his beard, feeling more and more uncomfortable with this discussion.

"I for one would rather not see Fëanor return to those old impulsive ways, if it's all the same to you, Findaráto," Dooku said, scowling.

"Artafindë, go to your room," Anthony said softly, sounding very tired. *I am so done*, Anthony broadcasted.

"What?" Dag's eyebrows went up.

Anthony's tone was still quiet as he replied. "You heard me." Anthony glared. "Go to bed."

Sören would have laughed if the situation were not so intensely awkward. Dag got up, huffed, and started stomping off towards his room. He paused to give Anthony a withering look. "You'll see that I'm right. Nat wants us to identify the source of the ward tampering... there it is." Then Dag continued stomping off and slammed his door hard enough that a painting fell off the wall.

Medika cringed. Darren facepalmed. "That went well," Darren said sarcastically.

"You've been awfully quiet during this..." Ali made a face. "Don't know if 'discussion' is the right word or not."

Darren shrugged. "I think it would be obvious I'm not keen on going into battle ill-prepared. Something about, dunno, harpers sadly singing and a star falling into darkness."

"Point," Anthony said. He leaned back in his seat, buried his face in his hands, and made noises. When he took his hands away from his face he was frowning again, brow furrowed. "We can't let it go forever, I hold no argument with that. But we can't do it now."

"Even I think that's a bad idea," Sören said. He shuddered, his mind's eye replaying those last moments of Fëanor's life, dying in Maglor's arms after he was ambushed by a Balrog swarm. His eyes met Maglor's across the room; Maglor's eyes were too bright and he swallowed hard.

"The day for reckoning will come," Maglor said, "but today is not that day. And hopefully, my cousin will get it through his head."

"Stubborn runs in this family," Sören said, and gave Anthony a look. "I told you to stay in Valinor -"

Anthony gave Sören a look right back. "Could we not?"

Dooku stood up and clapped his hands together, trying not to laugh. "Who wants tea?"

You're not off the hook either, Ñolo, Sören spoke into Dooku's mind.

I love you too, Fëanáro.

—

That night, Maglor slept with Ali, so it was just Dooku, Sören and Anthony in the bedroom. After a couple hours of languid, sensual lovemaking - the three of them sucking each other, then Dooku and Anthony taking Sören together, cock rubbing cock inside him in a slow, sweet fuck - Sören lay sandwiched between them, nose in Dooku's chest hair, Anthony's chest at his back, strong arms around him. Despite two powerful orgasms, Sören didn't doze off like he often did following sex, even as he was soothed by Dooku's heartbeat, and his lovers tenderly petting him. Sören's mind kept replaying the earlier family meeting, Dag's wild urgency with wanting to go on the offensive with Morgoth and Sauron *now*.

Then his mind's eye began replaying the Balrog attack of 2021... watching Frankie die.

Watching Anthony almost die. They had just been on a picnic, minding their own business. The battle had come to them, and they hadn't been ready.

Maybe the best defense was, in fact, a good offense, even if it meant having to pull it together on short notice.

"What if he's right?" Sören mused aloud.

"Hm?" Dooku's eyes opened.

Sören sighed, wishing he hadn't said that, but he knew Dooku wasn't going to let it go, so it was better to be honest about what he was thinking. "Dag," Sören said. "What if... we're better off not letting them ambush us, like last time?"

"We're not ready," Anthony said. "We went over this -"

"Jæja, but." Sören took a deep breath. He hated arguing with his partners - he'd done so much of that in his life as Fëanor, they needed and deserved some peace this time around - and yet, he felt like he'd be remiss if he didn't speak his mind. He looked into Dooku's dark brown eyes, stern yet compassionate. "Ringil came to you, yesterday, when we were in Iceland. Maybe the Force thinks it's time."

Dooku kissed Sören's brow and shook his head. "I think, rather, that was the Force inside *you*..." Dooku put a hand on Sören's heart. "Giving me a gift for your birthday."

"I was thinking it myself," Anthony said. He snickered. "And hinting how much he loves your *sword*."

Dooku rolled his eyes, but also chuckled. "Indeed. He loves it so much that it seems he chose to reincarnate in a land not merely known for its volcanoes, but also close to where my remains and sword were buried."

"And the only country to still use the letter *p* (thorn)," Anthony added.

Sören facepalmed - that now seemed painfully obvious in hindsight and he felt sheepish for not catching it sooner. But he was too wound up now, thinking about the Balrog attack, and Dag's reaction to the wards malfunctioning - that it seemed they were under attack again, and it would only be a matter of time before trouble showed up - so he didn't laugh long. "You really think we should wait."

Anthony exhaled. "Look. I don't like it either. Ideally yes, we would be better off striking first rather than defending ourselves, but we're... not in a position to do that currently. We're going up against something bigger than the entire Norse pantheon. We need to get ready for the eventuality of facing them - and the Valar too - but it's going to take time, and work. If we go to Morgoth now, wherever he bloody is, we're going to get curbstomped in thirty seconds. Then we have to go through all this reincarnation shit all over again, if we're lucky."

"Indeed." Dooku touched Sören's face. "I know, Fëanáro. I *know* it hurts, what they did to you, what they did to us. I know your soul cries out for justice. To put an end to this once and for all, so we can be safe. But please, *listen to your brothers* this time." Dooku took Sören's hand and kissed it, rested it against his cheek for a moment, his eyes tired and sad. "Don't do anything rash."

"Don't let my idiot son talk you into anything rash," Anthony said. "He got himself eaten by

a werewolf, he's not exactly in a position to judge sane martial decisions."

"Says the guy who left Valinor and got himself killed by Balrogs," Sören said.

"...Yes. But I also have military experience in this life and I'm speaking from that now. I *urge* you not to let him lead you on a hunt for Morgoth and Sauron. I'm terrified history is going to repeat itself, Sören." Anthony squeezed Sören tight and nuzzled Sören's neck. "I don't want to lose you again."

"None of us," Dooku said, steel in his velvet voice, "will lose each other again. I shan't allow it."

Sören closed his eyes, trying to push away the memories of the Helcaraxë... the grief and rage, the madness. They had all been so sure, once upon a time, they would find freedom on the other side, to live and love as they would, to be together freely, openly, for good. *Look where that got us.*

"And the best way to keep a cool head is for you not to burn yourself out with exhaustion," Anthony said, tapping Sören's shoulder. "You need to get some sleep."

"I tried," Sören said.

Anthony kissed the top of Sören's head, rubbed his nose in Sören's curls, as Dooku began to rock him. They pet him, the Force radiating in their touch, and bit by bit the tension slid away and Sören felt like he was getting heavier, sinking down and down and down, into darkness... then rising into the light through the forest trees at Formenos.

He slept soundly, until he woke with a start, hearing something move in the room - heavier than a cat, like a person stepping in. It felt like he was being watched. But when he sat up, there was no one there. Anthony and Dooku were sleeping on either side of him.

You're just paranoid now that the wards are down, Sören told himself. He did a quick scan with the Force. *Can't feel anybody.*

...Unless they don't want to be felt.

But that was absurd. There were no other sounds of movement. *You're all hyped up. Go the fuck to sleep.* Sören lay back down; Anthony made a wordless murmur and rolled closer to Sören, throwing an arm around him.

Sören closed his eyes.

Chapter 12

Sören was so emotionally exhausted from yesterday's family discussion that when the alarm went off in the morning, he hit the snooze button. And then he hit it again. And again. He finally stopped hitting the snooze button and went back to sleep, thinking he'd just nap "an hour more", and was woken up by Snúður walking on him, standing on his sternum, and headbutting him in the face. When Sören opened his eyes, glanced over at the clock, and saw what time it was - almost noon, three hours after the alarm - he yelled "oh shit" and scrambled to get ready for Uncle Nat's visit.

It was enough of a time crunch that Sören decided he would shower that evening. He also decided to wear the same jeans he had on yesterday, though he put on fresh boxer-briefs. When the jeans were on he felt the weight and warmth of the Silmarils, which he kept in a drawstring pouch in his pocket; the Silmarils and now also the mini-portal went wherever he went, to reduce the risk of them being stolen. Sören was stressed out enough last night that he'd forgotten to take the things out of his jean pockets and put them in their usual space in the bedtable drawer, they'd just been inside his jeans hanging over the desk chair - he hadn't put the jeans in the wash either, which was just as well. Uncle Nat had come to visit him after the ritual last time, and this time Sören wanted to show him the mini-portal, made from the stone that had traveled with Uncle Nat across universes, that Uncle Nat had felt compelled to give to Sören; Sören now felt compelled to show him there had been a reason for that.

Because none of the non-Aboriginal family members were permitted to watch the warding ritual, Anthony and Dooku took advantage of a window of time to go to town to buy food at the supermarket and buy animal feed, which meant they'd be gone for a few hours. Sören held the note for a moment - he could smell Anthony's cologne and breathed it in, comforted by the scent. Then he folded up the note and put it in his pocket next to the pouch of Silmarils, a little sheepish at the sentimentality of it but not able to help it just the same.

In the same pocket was the cold iron of the troll cross Junior had made. It was time to put it on a leather cord and wear it as a necklace, while he was thinking about it. He went to the kids' craft area and when he found what he was looking for, he carefully made a lanyard and looped the troll cross around his neck, with the iron resting at his heart. Not knowing why, just knowing it felt right, Sören held out his shirt collar and popped the troll cross under his shirt, feeling the cool metal against his skin.

The troll cross went under his shirt just in time to hear the car pull in, and Ali and Maglor's muffled voices outside. Sören looked out the window and saw Nat getting out, hobbling on his cane. Self-driving cars were becoming more common - they had one; Sören hadn't been able to drive since his accident in October 2020, but he could get in a self-driving car, appreciating the freedom it gave him - but such vehicles were also still expensive and Sören knew Uncle Nat didn't have a lot of money and was too proud to accept a gift. In any case, Ali and Maglor were set to pick the kids up at school when they brought Nat back, and Sören was glad they got to spend time together on those little road trips.

Sören helped Medika clean and make sandwiches and sugar biscuits while Uncle Nat did the ceremony outside. Like last time, Sören heard something like a sonic boom and felt the windows rattling, then a humming vibration, enough that the cats stopped eating for a moment and stared at each other, not knowing what to make of it. Briefly, Sören considered the possibility of offering to buy Nat a self-driving car in exchange for Nat telling them what was responsible for the wards failing, how specifically they were being

attacked - it really bothered him, now that he was feeling the power of the wards, that they would go down so soon, and maybe they could stop it better if they knew the mechanics of how the wards were being tampered with - but he didn't know if the offer of an expensive item in exchange for that information would be offensive or not, so he kept that thought to himself and re-focused on cutting the sugar biscuit dough, preferring to do it with his hands rather than using telekinesis, working out the lingering tension of the night before.

When the ritual was done, Nat came inside for tea and sandwiches and biscuits, accompanied by Ali and Darren; Maglor came in a few minutes later, with Huan tagging along.

Sören glanced around. "Where's Dag?" In his haste to get ready, he hadn't checked on Dag, and now his heart beat faster, hoping Dag hadn't been so upset after storming off last night that he'd self-injured - or worse.

Maglor put a hand on Sören's arm, sensing the sudden panic. "I saw Dag walking into the gym just before I came out to the house."

"Oh, OK." Sören breathed a small sigh of relief. Exercise was a good, healthy way to deal with stress, and Sören was glad Dag was doing that to blow off steam instead of something else.

"Should one of us go get him?" Ali shifted awkwardly in her seat.

Maglor shook his head. "Nah, let him be. I think he needs some alone time after... yeah."

"After what?" Uncle Nat asked, blinking slowly.

"We had a difficult conversation last night about the wards," Medika said.

"Hm." Uncle Nat narrowed his eyes, but said nothing else, taking a sip of tea.

For the next while Sören just listened while Medika, Nat, Ali and Darren talked - Sören was bad at small talk, and felt like he'd be intruding to discuss anything deeper. But finally Nat's eyes locked with Sören's across the room and he said, "You want to discuss something with me."

Sören knew that Nat was Force sensitive, but he was still unprepared for Nat to make that observation. He nodded and stretched. "Can we talk privately?"

Sören walked Nat out to his forge - Sören jokingly called it "his office" in moments like these. But once they were seated, before Sören could reach into his pocket and begin telling Nat about the mini-portal, Nat once again looked into Sören's eyes - almost as if he were looking through Sören, into his soul - and Nat said, point-blank, "There is a storm coming, Fëanáro."

Sören flinched as if he'd been struck. To his knowledge, nobody in the family had brought up "the elf thing" to Nat. Sören was sure Uncle Nat knew Maglor wasn't human, but it was a jump from there to recognize Sören as Fëanor. And yet, Sören knew he shouldn't be surprised, since Nat was a shaman, he had power, of course he'd know what Sören was.

But the proclamation that danger was on its way, threw Sören just as much as Nat calling him Fëanáro. Obviously, if the wards had gone down again so soon, there was interference and that didn't bode well. But Nat seemed to be suggesting trouble would find

them sooner rather than later, the way one noticed changes in the air just before a storm.

Sören nodded, and once again his mind's eye recalled the picnic where the Balrogs attacked. Once again his mind's eye made him watch Frankie dying, burning alive, shrieking. After such a difficult life with her mother's abuse, Frankie had only gotten a few years of peace and happiness before such a tragic end. And once again, Sören wondered if it would have made a difference if they'd had the mini-portal then, jumping through the wormhole to transport themselves somewhere else, maybe even hide in another universe for a time.

That, of course, could be tricky. Sören knew Nat had been psychologically traumatized from getting lost in the multiverse, hopping from universe to universe until Nat had met with one of Sören's counterparts and that version of Sören somehow knew how Nat could get home. Nat hadn't been believed when he'd told others where he'd been, and had been institutionalized for awhile - his hands shook with the slight tremor of someone who had tardive dyskinesia from antipsychotic medication. Sören shuddered to think of the trauma Nat had endured when hospitalized back before mental health care had abolished or greatly diminished certain practices. It was imperative that not happen to him, or anyone in his family - the trauma Sören already had to live with for eternity was bad enough.

"Uncle Nat," Sören said, "I hope you won't mind me asking, but when you met... another me... what happened?"

Nat took a deep breath, and looked away - looked *out*, like he was seeing it in the distance. "I showed up just as you and the big pointy-eared fella were coming to use the portal. I panicked and you guys calmed me down and then asked me to explain and I told you I was lost. I asked you guys where I was and what was the date because it kept changing, you see."

Sören nodded. Now he had more questions than answers - why, for example, he and Maglor were using one of the portals in World War 2.

Nat seemed to sense the unvoiced question. "You said you were off to kill Hitler," Nat said with a smile.

Sören's laughter rang out - that delighted him, much as he wished there weren't other worlds where Hitler happened. He hoped that whether that was literally true or only in the sense that they had taken a portal to France or Germany to do some sabotage on the Nazis, that he and Maglor had succeeded. *Not just us*. In Sören's mind's eye he could see Anthony, once again part of the Royal Navy, working with the Norwegian Resistance, handsome in his uniform. Even better out of it, Sören and Anthony feverishly undressing each other...

Sören snapped himself back to attention, hoping Nat didn't pick up on *those* thoughts. Sören made himself refocus on the topic of the portals and Nat's multiverse travels. "How many different worlds did you get lost in?"

"About six or seven," Nat said.

Sören cocked his head to one side. "How did the other version of me help you get home?"

Nat leaned back. "He asked if I had brought anything with me from the world I come from, other than the clothes I had on. I told him I had - there was a backpack, I was hiking that day - and we took out my thermos and he said that was good enough and if I grabbed

onto it and thought of home, it would 'pull' me there."

"That makes sense. So it seems like you just need something to hold onto, a piece of home, to bring you back."

"I reckon." Then Nat narrowed his eyes. "You're thinking about going to other worlds, ain't ya?"

"If it becomes necessary. If shit hits the fan and we have to hide."

"It's a long way to Uluru -"

"I don't need to go to Uluru. That stone you gave me, last time you were here. I made something with it." Sören reached into his pocket.

The mini-portal wasn't there. Sören made a face, and reached into his other pocket, wondering if he'd accidentally switched pockets. It wasn't in that, either.

Sören kept the mini-portal deep enough in the pocket that the cats couldn't pull it out and play with it. So that ruled out the possibility that one of the cats got it. But now Sören's mind was racing, wondering what the hell happened. He could have sworn the mini-portal was in its pocket when Sören was wearing these same jeans yesterday, the Silmarils were still in their drawstring pouch. Sören knew that he'd been agitated yesterday, even before the family meeting where Dag got upset, but it didn't seem likely that Sören would have forgotten to put the mini-portal in his jeans, even under stress.

"Shit," Sören said, leaping up and frantically feeling around his pockets.

Nat also stood, rising on his cane. "Well, it sounds to me like you need to look for it, and I better get home before my dog thinks I abandoned him. He doesn't like car rides or I woulda brought him."

"OK. Thank you for coming out and -"

Nat nodded. He patted Sören on the arm. "Good luck with finding it. You can show me next time I see you, yeh?" Nat winked, and then he hobbled out of the forge.

As soon as Nat left, Sören dropped down and began crawling around on his hands and knees, desperately searching the floor to see if maybe he had a hole in his pocket and didn't know it and it had slipped out. But there was no mini-portal on the floor, and Sören finally took off his jeans to examine them, checking for pocket holes - feeling a little sheepish that he hadn't done that first.

With his jeans slung over his shoulder, not thinking, just panicking, Sören ran out of the forge in his boxer-briefs, and to the smaller house, where he, Dooku and Anthony stayed. Sören used the Force to pull the laundry basket over and frantically began going through the jeans and pants waiting to be washed, feeling in every pocket to see if the mini-portal was in there. Then he crawled around on the floor of every room, hunting for it on the floor, even checking for it under beds, under couches, in case one of the cats had in fact gotten it.

Nothing.

Sören stood up, and it finally hit him. First, he remembered waking up startled, feeling like someone had been in their room, but there was nobody there. Then his mind's eye

replayed the family meeting last night.

*Sören, we need to take your mini-portal, and go find Morgoth and Sauron. We need to deal with them once and for all. We need to deal with them **now**.*

"Dag," Sören said aloud, head spinning, heart pounding in his ears. "Dag. *Dag*. DAG, Dag, Dag, no, *no*, **NO** -"

Sören ran for the door, and before he opened it, he looked down, noticing he was still in his underwear. He swore under his breath, put his jeans back on - pulled out the drawstring pouch to make sure the Silmarils were still there - then he took off, making a mad dash for the fitness room where Dag had last been seen.

—

When Sören walked in, Dag wasn't working out. He was sitting on the edge of the weight bench, passing the mini-portal from one hand to the other, like he was waiting for Sören.

Sören put a hand on his hip and made a "give it" gesture with the other. "Dag, come on."

Dag looked up, his lips quirked with a half-smile, but he continued to play with the mini-portal, not saying anything.

Sören exhaled sharply. "I don't want to take it from you by force, but I will."

Dag shrugged, still playing with the mini-portal.

Sören reached out with one hand and began to pull with the Force. The mini-portal started to lift from Dag's fingers, and before it could slip away Dag gripped it tighter. Sören pulled harder, and then he felt Dag's strength in the Force pushing back against him, resisting. Sören pulled as hard as he could and as he pulled he pushed, trying to knock his brother over to break the resistance. But then Dag waved his free hand and Sören was flung back a few feet, falling on the floor.

"Motherfucker." Sören spat a lock of hair out of his face. He tried to pull again, this time with a wave of his own hand to try to Force throw Dag. Dag waved his arm again, this time towards himself, and Sören slid across the floor, over to Dag.

Dag held out his hand and Sören felt his limbs lock up from the neck down, frozen. His heartbeat slammed away, and the pit of his stomach rose in fear. He also felt a tight ache in his chest, tears stinging his eyes - this was betrayal. Even if it was understandable, with Dag's trauma, it was still betrayal.

"Dag," Sören croaked. "You need to stop. We can't go fight Morgoth right now. It's not safe -"

"You think you're safe, right now?" Dag snorted. He stood up and loomed over Sören, continuing to keep Sören's limbs locked. The hand holding the portal raised, and Sören watched a wormhole begin to spin on the wall behind them. "Come with me, through that portal. It's the only way we will ever be safe, is if we take them on, together -"

"No. Goddamn it Dag, no. That portal is mine, you stole it, give it back, I didn't consent to any of this -"

Dag reached down and pulled Sören up. The moment Dag's hand locked around Sören's arm, Sören felt a sharp cold against his chest, and realized it was the troll cross, suddenly ice-burning the same way Ringil did.

The talisman to ward against evil had sensed it.

Dag started walking backwards, as the wormhole continued spinning, growing larger, a wind blowing in the gym. Dragging Sören. But with each step, Dag's hold on Sören's limbs weakened, and Sören began pushing back to break the lock and get free. Sören started to get a headache, feeling like he was pushing against an enormous stone wall, but he could wiggle his toes, and then his fingers.

He thought about grabbing Dag's hand away from his arm, or trying to punch his brother, but he had a better idea. When Dag turned his head to look into the widening portal, Sören reached for the lanyard, pulled it off, and hit Dag in the back of the head with the troll cross.

Dag screamed like he'd been burned or stabbed, and when he turned around, Sören saw the same blue eyes that Dag briefly had on the mountain just before Ringil returned to Dooku, but now the blue eyes didn't fade back to grey, staying blue. Sören wrenched his arm back as Dag's hand went to the back of his head, and Sören took a step backwards, blinking, shaking.

Suddenly there was the smell of ozone, and the air began to crackle with static electricity. Sören watched as a giant hammer, larger than Sören's smithing hammer, materialized out of thin air in Dag's free hand. Dag took a swing like the hammer weighed nothing and Sören ducked and rolled out of the way.

Dag swung the hammer again, and a blue lightning bolt shot out, that Sören narrowly missed, rolling away again. Sören got up - he was about to run away and just let Dag have the mini-portal, but then he realized this wasn't "Dag" and the mini-portal wasn't "Dag's" goal. It never had been. "Dag" wanted to get them through the mini-portal and then take them Force knew where. Not to fight Morgoth and Sauron, that was for sure.

Dag swung the hammer and another bolt of lightning aimed at Sören, but this time Sören bent forward and charged, barreling ahead, and when he was a few feet away he pounced on Dag, knocking them both to the ground. Sören pulled and this time he got the mini-portal. Dag reached for it and Sören felt the air crackling again, knew this time the hammer was coming behind him, about to strike -

Sören used the Force to shove the mini-portal back in his pocket, before it could be grabbed again, then he took the lanyard and smacked Dag in the face with the troll cross just before he rolled away. Dag screamed again and Sören saw the burn on his right cheek. Dag's free hand touched the burned cheek, hand trembling as he seethed through grit teeth. Before Dag could swing the hammer again, Sören raised his free hand, and clenched his fist, with a mental image of Dag choking. A mental image of drawing on the light of the Silmarils. Drawing on the fire within, the Flame Imperishable. All of that pulsing in his hand, pushing out through his will, burning. Taking the window of opportunity, feeling "Dag's" power weaken with the burn from the troll cross, letting his own power rise.

And "Dag" did begin to choke, dropping the hammer and falling to his knees, clutching at his throat, gasping for breath.

Sören clenched his fist tighter and Dag rose up two feet in the air, choking and choking.

Sören kept choking until he felt the other presence in the room fade, the body no longer struggling, just a leaden sack of meat. The body hit the floor and Sören waited, to make sure he was really dead.

Then Sören fell over, shaking, hyperventilating, and vomited.

—

A moment later Sören got up, not able to deal with being in the same room as the body - he couldn't even look at it as he bolted for the door. He staggered out of the gym, still breathing hard, still shaking. He looked out at the garage and from the absence of vehicles observed that Ali and Maglor had already gone to bring Nat back, and Anthony and Dooku were still out on their shopping trip. The self-driving car was still there.

Sören had no idea how to explain this, especially not to Anthony - "I killed Finrod but I don't think he was Finrod and I don't know what happened to Finrod" wasn't a conversation Sören wanted to have - and especially, *especially* not to Kate and Tori, "the guy I just said who's really your biological father, well, I killed him but I'm not sure that's even the guy".

Ali and Maglor were going to pick up the kids at school while they were out. Sören needed to buy them some time. First he put the lanyard around his neck - the troll cross was no longer cold - then he pulled out his cell phone and hit Maglor's number on speed dial.

"Yo," Maglor said.

Somehow, in the midst of his panic and confusion, Sören remembered the emergency codephrase, which they hadn't had to use since 2020. "*Veninya vilyanirwanen ná quanta as angolingwi.*"

"What? Are you OK? What's going on?"

"Look..." Sören took a deep breath, looking out at Darren walking with Huan, herding the sheep. "Don't bring the kids home immediately. Take them to Maccas or... or something, there's a situation. When they do get home don't let them in the gym." The kids didn't need to see Dag's body.

"Adar. *What is going on.*"

Sören hung up.

Chapter 13

Sören had been in fight mode, and now he was in flight mode. He had to get out of here before Anthony and Dooku came back, before Ali and Maglor came back with the kids. He didn't know how he was going to tell them about the fight with "Dag", but he knew trying to explain "Dag" wasn't Dag would be a hard sell, and if they thought Sören had killed his own brother in cold blood for stealing the mini-portal...

...They'll think this is Fëanor kinslaying all over again.

He loved his partners and his family, but he also knew love wasn't unconditional and this very likely would come up on a hard limit. The thought of being sent to prison, or exiled, would be bad enough on its own, but with Sören being immortal, a life sentence in a prison-like setting sounded like hell.

Do you really think they'll do that to you? They're Force sensitive, they should be able to tell you're not lying.

And yet, they were Force sensitive and they hadn't been able to pick up on "Dag" being... whatever it was. Sören didn't want to test his luck. At least if he went now, he could go on his terms.

You're abandoning your husbands. You're abandoning your children -

I'm already dead to them. Sören swallowed hard, thinking of the panic and chaos that would ensue once Dag's body was discovered in the gym. In particular, he thought of his children being afraid of him, never seeing him the same way again.

Not thinking, just a whirlwind of fear - and fresh grief for Dag, and horror that he'd killed so quickly and coldly, like the way he'd killed Einar years ago - Sören stormed through the front door of the smaller house. Snúður came to greet him, rubbing against his legs, tail in the air. Sören thought about getting one of the cat carriers and taking Snúður with him, but wherever he was going, it would be more complicated to take a cat with him. Snúður had a home here, people who loved and cared for him. He would miss the cat who had given him back the will to live in 2017, but he couldn't be selfish and force Snúður to live in a car.

Sören marched to the hall closet. He produced his bug-out bag - a few days' worth of clothes, some MREs and bottled water, personal hygiene products, a first aid kit, a Swiss army knife, a folded-up small tent and rolled-up sleeping bag - and then he opened the safe. He pulled out one of the guns - a Glock pistol - and made sure the safety was on, then he took out a silencer. There were several manila envelopes in the safe, each marked with a name, containing fake ID cards, passports, credit cards to various bank accounts, and stacks of paper currency from a couple dozen countries. Sören took the one marked with his name and shoved it in the bug-out bag, along with the gun and the silencer.

He gave Snúður a few last pettings - Snúður hopped up on an arm of the couch and meowed in distress, as if he knew what was going on - and Sören leaned in to give him a kiss. "I'm sorry," he said, skritchng the cat. "Take care of the guys for me, OK?"

He walked out to the self-driving car and got in. Once it was on, it needed instructions for where to go.

Sören decided his first stop would be somewhere he hadn't been since the Balrog attack - the place where it happened. The place where Frankie, Kenny, and his uncle Böðvar died.

—

As soon as Sören pulled into the parking spot, the nausea came back. He waited for a moment, wondering if he was going to vomit again, then he stepped outside into the Australian summer heat.

It was a bit of a walk from the parking lot to the grassy cliff overlooking the sea, tall grass and wildflowers swaying in the ocean breeze, Sören's curls blowing. One would never know, looking out at the lush green and the deep blue sparkling water, under the endless bright blue sky, that this place had seen death and carnage in 2021.

Sören could still *feel* it, could still hear Frankie screaming. His chest tightened, a lump in his throat, tears in his eyes as he approached the edge of the cliff.

He looked out at the waves and thought of Maglor throwing a Silmaril into the sea eons ago. Then he thought of that fateful day of the Balrogs, and Ali playing a game of "chicken", getting them to chase her, then electrocuting them with Force lightning once they'd fallen into the water.

He thought of the lightning bolts flying out of "Dag's" massive hammer. *Surely when they find his body and see the hammer, they'll know "Dag" isn't Dag and something went terribly wrong.*

Sören wasn't so sure about that. He wondered if the hammer was a glamour to project and "amplify" Force lightning - after all, the hammer had appeared out of thin air - and if it would disappear once the brain that was producing the glamour was gone.

Sören shivered despite the summer heat. His body remembered what that static charge had felt like. He had, for a moment, been sure he was going to die.

But instead, he'd won. Except it didn't feel like winning. It was probable he'd never actually been reunited with his brother and that "Dag" had been an impostor all along... and it was probable that Dag would never be found, that he was long since dead. An infiltrator would explain why the wards kept going down, taken down from within.

And now Sören was in the conundrum of looking like history had repeated itself, he was a kinslayer all over again, this time his own brother, killing him over a stolen item. *Murderer. Monster.*

For a brief, wild instant, Sören looked into the waves and thought about throwing himself into the ocean. He had his bug-out bag on his back, which was heavy, and would sink him like a stone. It seemed like the days, weeks, months and years ahead would only be loneliness and pain, condemned to roam the world like Maglor once had, except Maglor's family was dead, and his was mostly right there, moving on without him... not wanting a monster among them.

Sören's fists clenched, remembering the Noldorin exile... the long trek along the Helcaraxë, wondering if they would ever see light again, if they would ever see life, after all the barren, frozen wasteland, the hunger and the cold and the *fear*. He remembered how demoralized he was, they all were, cold made colder still when Fëanor had reached

out for Fingolfin's comfort and been pushed away, when Fëanor had told Finarfin to go back for the sake of his children, to keep one branch of their bloodline alive.

He was wandering his own private Helcaraxë now, and the deep cold threatened to quench the fire within, guttering low as his hopes were shattered beyond shattering.

The waves beckoned. After the abuse and bullying of his childhood, then the madness of his early twenties, the year of hell with Justin Roberts in his thirties... then finally finding a measure of happiness with his family, just for it to be taken away like this... it was tempting to make the pain stop once and for all, and not endure decades, centuries, eons more of loneliness and heartache.

And yet, he knew that so long as the Doom was upon him, if he cast himself into the sea, this was probably it. He had been damned lucky that the power of love that he, Maglor, and his brothers had for each other had tethered them back to each other. He knew there wouldn't be another chance, after this. If he was even reincarnated - and he doubted Namo would let that happen, seeing how close they'd come to taking on the Valar, yet so far - he didn't think he'd be able to find them again, or that they'd want to deal with Fëanor, the kinslayer, a third time around.

It wasn't just that. If he annihilated himself, he had a feeling one by one, the rest of them would die, as they had so long ago. He thought of Stephen King's *Dark Tower* series, the concept of the *ka-tet*, souls bound together for a common purpose. Once one member of the *ka-tet* died, they all tended to fall, sooner or later. *Ka like a wheel. Ka like a wind.*

If nothing else, he had to stay alive for the sake of his kin, even if they didn't want him back after what happened with Dag, which he was sure of. He couldn't put Maglor through losing all of his family a second time around.

As if on cue with thinking of Maglor, Sören's cell phone went off, and it was Maglor calling back. Sören swiped to refuse, and then turned the power off, using the Force to slip the phone back in his pocket. But just seeing Maglor come up on the caller ID undid him, and Sören dropped to his knees, crying out into the sky, one long note of tortured pain. He wouldn't kill himself, for Maglor's sake, but he didn't want to be alive anymore either. Mostly, he needed the pain to stop *right now*.

Sören found himself taking off his heavy backpack and setting it on the ground beside him. He unzipped it open and rummaged through it. He felt the gun - again, tempting - and then he found the Swiss army knife. He took out the Swiss army knife and acting in pure impulse, like a wounded animal desperately trying to gnaw off its own leg to free itself from a trap, he clicked open the knife and did something he hadn't done since he was a teenager.

He cut.

Sören cut and cut, making crisscross cuts down his arms like he had been wont to do at least a couple of times each month in the late 1990s. Punishing himself, and also "hard rebooting" his brain to focus on something else - the stinging slash of the blade, the flowing blood. As he cut he wept bitterly, the lash of the knife breaking his reserve, a catharsis, emotions pouring out like the blood down his arms.

And then, right before his eyes, the wounds began to close. He had, of course, gained speed healing when he attained immortality, the constitution of one of the Eldar. The Eldar weren't impervious to injuries - Maedhros had lost a hand, Maglor had severely scarred his - but it took a lot, much more than the superficial cuts with the knife. Never

had Sören been more aggravated by the choice he'd made to become immortal for Maglor's sake, as he was watching the wounds fade like he hadn't taken a knife to himself at all. "*Fokking tíkssonur, fokking skít, skítasonur hóru, helvítis fjandans móðirfokk!*" Though Sören had lived in Australia long enough that English came more and more readily to him, he slipped back into his native language in his fit of rage, throwing the knife into the grass several feet away.

Sören dropped down into the grass, like he was prostrating himself before an angry god, but he would not ever surrender to Manwe or anyone like him. The anger was his, the fire trying to destroy him from within. He beat the ground with his fists, screaming until he was hoarse, sobbing until it hurt. He hadn't punished himself enough, the closed wounds mocking him. Even in his immortality, he felt the weight of the Doom.

Sören rose up, and looking up into the sky, he used the Force to grab the Swiss army knife from the ground. He couldn't wound himself, but he could hurt himself another way. Once the tool was in his hand, Sören clicked open the scissors and took them to his hair, snipping away as he looked out to sea, still resisting the strong urge to throw himself off the cliff. His hair was his one vanity - he had in fact always wanted curly hair in his life as Fëanor, something rare among the Noldor, and he was certain Fëanor had designed the human vessel for his fëa, with its thick dark curls. It wasn't enough to glamour himself with short hair, since glamour was a temporary illusion, one he would have difficulty holding in his emotional upset, and in any case he knew when he'd glamour'd his hair he could still feel its true length. He hacked at his hair until it was lopped short and curls were scattered around the grass.

He knew he'd probably done a messy job and he'd have to do another trim later to neaten it up if he didn't want to look like a bum - he didn't trust his glamouring ability to go very far for the next day or so. And he still didn't feel better, really, but it was something.

"KAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAA," called out an overhead bird.

Sören looked up again and he saw two ravens circling. Huginn and Muninn had followed him out here.

Ka. Sören heard hysterical laughter bubbling out of him - not pleasant laughter, the sort of maniacal laughter of a man losing his mind.

He got up, brushed the hair off his clothes, used the Force to lift the backpack off the ground, and then he walked back to the car, with Huginn and Muninn swooping in and perching themselves on the roof and hood of the car respectively. Sören shook his head at them. "You don't have to be here, you know," he said. "I don't want you to see me when I'm crazy like this. Go on now."

"Nevermore," Muninn croaked, and Huginn made an imitation of a human blowing a raspberry.

Sören sighed and got back in the car. The adrenaline crash was here, and he began shaking with chills despite the summer heat and humidity. Another wave of nausea hit him. He needed to get out of his head altogether for awhile.

He also needed to get out of town, in case they were sending the police after him. He knew if that were the case it would only be a matter of time before the authorities caught up but at least he could make them work for it.

"Adelaide," Sören told the car's navigational system; Ceduna to Adelaide was over eight

hours one way.

—

By the time the car drove him to Adelaide, it was night, and not a lot of places were open for food. He wasn't hungry, but he also knew if he didn't eat, he was going to make his scrambled brain chemistry even worse. So he reluctantly took out his phone and searched Google for pubs.

His phone had blown up over the eight-hour drive, and the most recent text message was from Anthony. *GET BACK HERE NOW*

"So what, you can put me in baby jail?" Sören shook his head, not replying, just shoving his phone back in his pocket.

The song "Thunderstruck" by AC/DC was just beginning when Sören walked into the pub, and Sören resisted the urge to knock over tables and throw chairs to protest the unfortunate timing of the song. But as the song wound to a close while he sat with a bottle of Guinness - he didn't even like Guinness - his mind's eye replaying the attack in the gym, and the thunder, got to Sören enough that against his better judgment, he gave into morbid curiosity to look at the scene of the crime, and he pulled out the mini-portal, where a shard of a palantir had gone into its creation. Since he knew from his life as Feanor that the palantir could potentially be used to view the past as well as the future, though it was more tricky seeing the future since looking into the future tended to change it, he decided to look at the immediate aftermath of his family finding Dag's body in the gym.

What he saw made his mouth open, a frisson down his spine, hair standing on end, arms gooseflesh. The body on the floor of the gym didn't look like Dag at all. The man was beefy rather than wiry, with shoulder-length reddish-blond hair and a bushy red beard. "Dag" had died with his eyes open, and the corpse had the same blue eyes, drained of the spark of life. Anthony, Dooku and even Maglor took turns trying to lift the hammer off the floor and couldn't, not even the three of them pulling with the Force.

"*Pór*," Sören said in a hushed voice, remembering the mythology he'd been taught in school.

Suddenly, it all made sense. Just as Feanor had been the Fenrir wolf prophesied to kill Odin, Jormundgand had been prophesied to kill Thor, and the "World Serpent" had been the völvu seeing Dag, with the tubes of the Large Hadron Collider that Dag had a hand in developing, and back to the days when he was Finrod, with the Ring of Barahir. In 2020, to prevent being killed by Jormundgand, Thor had disguised himself as a homeless woman and attacked Dag in a parking lot to get Dag to use his Force powers in public, which had been caught on a surveillance camera and gotten the attention of at least one government agency. And so, Dag had been taken away and held prisoner for twelve years.

Thor had been conspicuously absent from the battle in Asgard, in late 2021. Sören had wondered what happened and why Thor wasn't there.

It explained why "Dag" looked ready to murder someone when they'd had the discussion about the wards, and the fight against the Norse gods had been brought up. If Thor was posing as "Dag", of course he would be angry hearing about what happened to his people.

Sören stroked his chin. He still had more questions than answers, including what had happened to his actual twin brother. He was going to need more alcohol to deal with finding the answers - a lot more. He called for more Guinness.

As Sören drank, he spoke to his mini-portal with the Force. *What happened? How was "Dag" replaced with Thor?*

The palantir showed him when Dag was released from medical care at The Shop, being driven home. Anthony had wanted to transport Dag himself, but MI6 had been insistent upon using one of their drivers. Thor had fled during the Ragnarök, and had been watching and waiting for his opportunity to get revenge on Sören and his family. As he saw the car bringing Dag to his destination, he made one of the tires go flat. When the driver pulled over to fix the car, Thor materialized, knocked the driver out, then killed Dag and glamourised Dag's form, destroying the body with lightning before waking up the driver.

Sören got a glimpse inside Thor's head, feeling the thunder god keeping himself in check, resisting the urge to kill them all right away. He continued playing the waiting game, restoring Sören's hope so he could crush it. But his presence interfered with the wards, and Thor knew it was a matter of time before the troll cross alerted Sören that evil was in the immediate vicinity, so he took the mini-portal as bait. He'd never intended to fight Morgoth and Sauron. He had been hoping to throw Sören into the wormhole and keep him trapped between worlds, a slow and torturous death. But in the end, Sören had killed Thor wearing Dag's body - the body of the "World Serpent" - and so Jormungand had killed Thor in the end, just as Thor had killed Jormungand, like the prophecy said.

Sören put the mini-portal back in his pocket, leaned back in his seat, and buried his face in his hands, as "New Sensation" by INXS thumped away.

*Hate baby hate
When there's nothing left for you
You're only human
What can you do
It'll soon be over
Don't let your pain take over you*

*Love baby love
It's written all over your face
There's nothing better we could do
Than live forever
Well that's all we've got to do*

That was another poorly-timed song, but after living for twelve years in Australia, Sören was convinced there was some kind of law obligating Australian pubs to play AC/DC and INXS. *I need another drink.* Sören finished his bottle of Guinness, wincing at the taste. *need ALL THE DRINKS.*

Since he was using a self-driving car, Sören knew he could drink to excess without endangering himself or others. One more drink became two, became five, became more until the bartender told him "you've had enough, mate," and Sören paid his bill on the way out. A few staggering steps out of the pub, Sören faceplanted and ended up vomiting for the second time today. People were weaving to and fro in the parking lot but nobody approached him asking if he was all right and needed help. Sören felt disgusted with himself as he picked himself up to get to his car, but the alcohol had taken the edge off - the horror was like a dull ache in the back of his mind now.

Once he got in the car, his cell phone buzzed in his pocket again. It was a text message from Anthony. *Get your arse home.*

Sören facepalmed and sighed. He ran his hand over his face and shook his head, even though nobody was there to see his response. He knew that Anthony, Maglor and Dooku had seen the body wasn't Dag, and were probably intelligent enough to figure out the burly, red-bearded guy with the hammer was a dead Norse thunder god who'd come looking for revenge after they killed his friends. They too could use a palantir and scry into the past to see how it happened. But now he felt ashamed of himself for running - though he knew he couldn't be expected to be rational with so much adrenaline pumping at the time - and he also picked up from Anthony's tone in the texts that once he came back home, he was going to be yelled at for running.

He couldn't deal with that right now. He felt like a coward, continuing to run and hide, but being yelled at after everything that had happened today was going to break him.

He needed a few days before he could go home. Time for Anthony and the others to calm down... time for himself to calm down, to take the first few steps back from the trauma and the madness, because right now all he needed was *one more upsetting thing* and he probably would throw himself into the sea, or take the gun and...

"Fuck." Sören rubbed his face, not wanting to think about it. Not wanting to think at all. He was suddenly very tired.

Sören was tired enough to want to sleep in the car, but he knew that would probably attract the attention of the police and he didn't need that. He managed to get the car to drive him to a hotel, and he decided to check in for a week, figuring that would be long enough for the worst of the storm to pass, and cooler heads prevail.

Sören immediately flopped down on the bed of his suite, not even bothering to take off his clothes or his Doc Martens. A few hours later he woke up with a horrible pounding headache, and got up to make coffee in the kitchenette - just taking an aspirin wouldn't work. As he sat in the dark, by the glow of the appliances and nightlights, Sören looked out the window over the cityscape of Adelaide and wondered if Anthony was up too.

He knew he hadn't slept well not just because he had too much to drink, or because he was in an unfamiliar place, but he wasn't used to sleeping alone. This was, in fact, the first time in almost fifteen years that he had done so. He felt that skin hunger, the ache to be held in his partners' arms, snuggle against the weight and shape of their bodies... feel their presence in the Force.

You should go home, Sören told himself.

But he knew if he did that, there was going to be a fight, and he still didn't want to deal with that.

And that was how Sören found himself drinking coffee and looking into the mini-portal again. He needed comfort from his partners... but a version of his partners would do. Not the ones here, who would yell if he returned right now.

He could go to another world and hide just for a few days, until he had stabilized himself.

So he looked, and waited, until he saw it - Dooku and Maglor on a beach, walking hand-in-hand. He didn't see them with another version of himself, so they probably hadn't met

that world's version of him yet, unless they were on a date by themselves, but... he'd figure that out when he got there.

When Sören was finished with his coffee, he grabbed his bug-out bag, checked out of the hotel, and the car drove him to a parking garage, where he paid for it to sit there for a week, then he walked a few streets in the middle of the night, just before the dawn, until he came to a park. He slipped into the trees, once again took the mini-portal and conjured the image of Dooku and Maglor in another world, and inquired as to a safe, secluded spot to come in. Once he'd found it, he got ready to go on his adventure. Huginn and Muninn alighted on his shoulders.

"Beam me up, Scotty," Sören said under his breath as the wormhole spun.

Chapter 14

When Sören came out the other side of the wormhole, faceplanting into grass, it occurred to him this maybe hadn't been one of his brightest ideas. He knew he was in the same universe as the scene that had played in the mini-portal...

...but he didn't know where he was. Or when.

He'd found a semi-secluded area to "land", but he had no idea how far away it was to civilization. Even though he was immortal, with the constitution of one of the Eldar, he would still wear down after a very long walk on foot.

Sören's first instinct was to reach for his cell phone, but before he could pull it out, he facepalmed, realizing that probably he wouldn't have service in another universe, unless he was lucky enough to have the same number as his counterpart here, and he doubted it.

Sören sat up and groaned. He glanced over his shoulder, where the wormhole had closed, and then looked around at the trees and the grass, up into the sky. "Fuck."

Huginn and Muninn swooped down - Huginn pecking in the grass in front of him, Muninn on his shoulder. Muninn started to peck at Sören's hair like he'd found a juicy bug, and before Sören could shove the bird away, he suddenly felt a rush. For a minute, it was like being on a rollercoaster, or a plane just taking off, but inside his head, being *slammed*. A series of images flashed in his mind's eye, all too quick to process, and then it was done, Sören's ears ringing, his stomach lurching, and Muninn hopped off his shoulder and joined Huginn in the grass to chase bugs.

Sören smacked himself in the head, as suddenly a whole bunch of answers to his questions came flooding at him - it was as if information had been directly downloaded into his brain. He was near Étretat, France. He was about an hour's walk from a hotel.

Huginn and Muninn flew up, circling, giving him an expectant look; they would lead the way.

"Jæja, I'm coming," Sören muttered as he picked himself up and began to walk, Huginn and Muninn gliding ahead slowly. He could figure out the rest from there.

Once Sören arrived at the hotel, an unassuming grey brick building somewhat larger than a cottage, but still a cozy size, with an herb garden and cute little trees, Huginn and Muninn flew up onto the rooftop; Huginn waved a wing as if to say "goodbye for now". Sören cautiously walked in, his boots making noise on the hardwood floor, and was immediately given a suspicious eye by the well-dressed middle-aged man behind the mahogany desk.

"Comment puis-je vous aider aujourd'hui, monsieur? Vous souhaitez réserver une suite?"

Oh shit, I don't speak French. Sören spoke Icelandic, English, and Danish. He knew that most people in France spoke English - in *his* universe of origin. He didn't know if that was the same here; maybe he'd jumped into a universe where French was the lingua franca. Even if the clerk spoke English, Sören had heard from Maglor recounting his travels that the French tended to think non-French-speaking tourists were rude, especially Americans. Sören swallowed hard.

Before he could reply in English, suddenly the words came out in French, like Muninn had "downloaded" French into his head, not just information about where he was. "*Je voudrais réserver une suite, oui. Quelque chose de petit, s'il vous plaît.*"

While the currency Sören had bought had tens of thousands of dollars for each country, Sören didn't want to be frivolous with it, since he planned on returning to his universe in the near future and they might need that money someday. Then, as Sören produced the manila envelope with the cash - which got another strange look - Sören felt another surge of panic, hoping this version of France used francs and that they looked like the stack he had in the envelope. He had credit cards, but he wasn't sure they would work here, or that if they did, that they wouldn't end up charging some unknown person's account.

To his relief, the concierge accepted the francs as payment, and Sören still had plenty to spare, the fee had barely made a dent. Once he was shown to his suite, on the ground floor, the concierge lingered - that mildly disapproving look made Sören panic again, hoping the concierge wasn't going to call the authorities - but then Sören decided he needed one piece of information Muninn hadn't given him.

"I've been backpacking around Europe and I had a rough time getting here from Germany," Sören lied, still speaking French. "Can you tell me the date?"

The concierge pursed his lips but then he gave a small nod. "May seventh, monsieur."

Sören gave a nervous laugh. "What year is it? I feel like I lost years off my life today."

"Ah, I see you are a funny one." The concierge sniffed, unsmiling, with a small eyeroll. "It is 2015, monsieur."

"Thank you very much!" Sören reached back into the envelope and gave him a hundred-franc note as a tip. The concierge's eyes widened and his mouth opened and before he could refuse, Sören shuffled into his room and quickly closed the door, hoping the large tip would be enough of a bribe to keep the concierge from acting on any suspicious feelings he might have gotten.

Sören didn't breathe for a moment and then it came out in a long huff, grabbing onto the chair by the door so he didn't fall over. His hands shook as he steadied himself. He knew Uncle Nat had gone from the 1970s in their world to the 1940s of another universe - but it was one thing to know that happened to someone else and another thing entirely to have it happen to him, even though he knew he should be prepared for it with having seen Dooku in the mini-portal, who didn't look older than late sixties. Doing the math, if this world's Dooku had been born in December 1948 like his, this world's Dooku was sixty-seven.

If there was a Sören in this universe, he was thirty-one.

God, just a baby. Sören cringed at that knee-jerk reaction - at forty-eight he was now at the age where he thought of anyone under thirty-five as a "kid". *Jesus Christ, I'm old. And someday I'll be two hundred and ranting about "kids these days."*

Sören flopped back on the bed. He looked around the room, with its hardwood floor and light grey walls, simple wooden furniture, a bay window with a sitting nook that had a spectacular view of the hotel's garden. The bedspread was white with a floral pattern in muted pinks, and there were framed prints of Monet on the walls.

Sören sat up with a start. *Monet*. This was *the* Etretat that Monet had visited, and painted. It begged the question of what Maglor and Dooku were doing here, in this universe. Were they on holiday? Muninn had given him enough of a mental "download" to figure out where he was, and apparently he spoke French now. But he drew a blank with what was going on with this world's version of Maglor and Dooku.

I guess that's for me to find out.

Sören made a noise and rubbed his face. He was *exhausted*. He was still mildly hungover, he hadn't slept well, his body still didn't like jumps through portals, and he'd had a long walk when he was running on fumes. The bed was cozy - Sören appreciated that Huginn and Muninn seemed to understand he'd be uncomfortable in a swanky hotel, so they'd found a more rustic, homey place - and Sören closed his eyes.

He woke up a couple of hours later with the urge to brush his teeth and take a shower, which he hadn't done since yesterday. The bathroom was small, and the shower narrow enough to make Sören feel slightly claustrophobic, but he got himself clean, and after he put on a fresh change of clothes he felt almost normal.

Almost. The haunted look in his eyes when he saw himself in the bathroom mirror was unnerving... and so was the messy crop of curls from when he'd lopped off his hair in Ceduna, the only way he could really self-injure. The haircut he'd given himself wasn't quite as ragged as he'd feared, but he still did a final trim to neaten it up a bit, angry with himself for cutting his hair in the first place - especially because he knew curly hair tended to grow *out* rather than down, at first, so he'd have much more in common with Bob Ross than Monet even if he was in Normandy and not Indiana. Briefly, Sören mused if there was a version of himself who lived in Indiana, and made himself laugh for the first time in days; that seemed so ridiculous as to be impossible.

[Then he had a mental image of himself in a car with a pretty redhaired woman, driving past a seemingly-endless field of corn.](#) It was a quick glimpse, but enough to make Sören's hair stand on end, his arms gooseflesh, a shiver down his spine. *What the FUCK. Indiana, really?*

Sören exhaled. *I need a fucking drink.*

Of course, he knew that self-medicating with alcohol wasn't a healthy coping skill - bitterly, he remembered how Einar and Katrin drank, and he had vowed never to turn into them. Stress-eating wasn't great either, but he did need to get some proper food in his system, he hadn't eaten much in the last twenty-four hours.

Sören glanced at his bug-out bag, and then remembered there wasn't a laptop in it, an oversight on his part. He found himself reaching for his cell phone, which had been transferred to his jeans pockets along with the Silmarils and the mini-portal, but once again he reminded himself he probably didn't have service in this universe so using his phone to Google restaurants in the area wasn't happening. He thought about going out and asking the concierge for recommendations but he knew he might be spending a lot more than the room cost, in that case, and also it might raise the concierge's suspicions even more for him to have come to Étretat without the slightest inkling of places to go while he was here.

Before Sören could fret too hard, he got a mental image of a restaurant that wasn't too far from the beach - and realized part of Muninn's "download" was amenities in the area. He loaded up his wallet, not wanting to lug the manila envelope with him, and then, feeling somewhat paranoid, he shoved the bug-out bag under his bed, hoping the concierge or

another employee wouldn't come sniffing around and see all the money or, worse, the gun. He felt a little weird about going out unarmed, but he knew he couldn't exactly walk around a small seaside town in Normandy with a Glock, and a gun wouldn't really do much if this universe's version of Morgoth saw a target.

Once again, Sören felt like he'd made a terrible decision traveling to another world, and he considered grabbing the bug-out bag, taking the mini-portal out and going home... but then, there was probably a reason why he'd seen this particular version of Maglor and Dooku. He needed to follow that lead, for a bit.

Sören headed out, and Huginn and Muninn came down from where they'd been roosting on the hotel roof, and led the way, once again gliding slowly, with Sören following several feet behind. Sören knew he was getting closer when he could smell sea salt on the air, and at last he arrived at *Chant de la sirène*, a lovely beachside cottage turned into a restaurant. There was another garden of herbs and roses on one side, and on the other side a courtyard with al fresco tables under pastel umbrellas, and a stone fountain of a mermaid accompanied by three swans. Seeing the stone swans made Sören ache for Anthony, and he wondered how his Anthony was doing... and where this world's Anthony was. He wondered if this world's Dooku knew who and what Maglor was, yet.

As Sören approached the restaurant he looked down at his jeans and worried he was too casual, but to his relief there were people dining in the courtyard who were more casually dressed, and Sören was let inside and shown a table without a problem. The restaurant specialized in seafood, and the parchment menu boasted that it had earned a Michelin star, so everything was a bit pricey. Sören went with a platter of shrimp, scallops, and salmon, with a bowl of French onion soup and a side of fondant potatoes and a glass of white wine. His table had a beach view, and as Sören waited for his food he leaned back in his seat and looked out at the ocean. Of all the places in the multiverse to have ended up, it seemed there were far worse ones than this. Sören was enthralled by the seascape even from a distance; he could see why this world's Dooku and Maglor were here, whether they were on holiday or lived here.

Sören found himself curious about that again - or how he'd even find them; Étretat was a small town, but that didn't mean he was guaranteed to cross paths with them here. Indeed, things might get ridiculously complicated if they were here with another version of himself. *You wouldn't have seen this place, out of thousands, millions, billions of possibilities in the multiverse, if you weren't meant to*, Sören told himself, but his anxiety still prickled. Sören made himself get off that train of thought, pouring himself a glass of ice water from the pitcher on his table - even the water tasted better here, crisp and fresh. He watched the sea again, and waited. His mind continued to badger him with other curiosities about this world - if the Force worked here, if he had to be as careful using it in public here, as he did in his own world. A casual glance around the restaurant, where people were eating and drinking using their hands, told Sören that probably he needed to be discrete about his abilities.

After what felt like an eternity his food came, and looked so beautiful Sören almost felt guilty about eating it. The artfulness of the food reminded him of Dooku's cooking - Dooku had opened a restaurant in Sydney, and some time after they'd gotten settled on the sheep farm, he'd opened a new restaurant in Ceduna, though he wasn't there every single day. Sören missed his old man, and hoped his Dooku wouldn't be too angry with him when he eventually returned. *I could even tell him I sampled French food with proper wine and everything, he might pardon me*. Sören smiled a little as he sipped his wine; he and Dooku were such opposites but Sören found the refined affectations endearing, just as Fëanor had found Fingolfin's courtly manners strangely adorable.

I love you, Nolo.

The food was delicious, and filling. As Sören's meal wound down he reached for the menu again, contemplating whether or not to order dessert. Then, on impulse, he finally took out his cell phone, deciding he was going to take pictures of the menu as a souvenir - and so he could eventually show his Dooku he had willingly set foot in "some fancy French place", of his own accord. And perhaps, if this restaurant existed in their world, they could go on holiday to France and enjoy their world's version of it.

He expected the camera to work, and was amazed to see he had service. That raised more questions than answers, ones that Muninn hadn't "downloaded" into his head, but instead of testing out the numbers in his contacts to see who owned them in this world, he did what he'd set out to do, pressing the button for the camera and then snapping a few photos of the menu. As he did, his gaze focused on a listing of the staff, resting for a moment on the name of the owner and head chef, a Nicholas Decaux. For some reason that name sounded familiar. He didn't understand why...

...Then his attention was caught by a deep, silken, resonant voice. He looked out and saw a certain six-five, silver-haired-and-bearded gentleman, olive skin, bushy eyebrows, hooded dark eyes, high cheekbones, patrician nose, handsome in a severe way, wearing the pristine white coat of a chef over white trousers, with black leather boots. The man was walking from table to table, leaning in to chat with each patron, smiling. Sören's mouth went dry and he felt for a brief instant like his heart had stopped. *There he is.*

Finally he was right there. Their eyes locked for a long moment - the older man's breath hitched, like he was looking at something beautiful - and then the man cleared his throat. *"Excusez-moi. Est-ce que tout est à votre goût, monsieur?"*

"Jæja," Sören replied, and then internally smacked himself, feeling like an idiot. *You can speak French now and your first response is in Icelandic. Fucking seriously?* But it was like he was seeing Dooku for the first time... love at first sight all over again. This world's Dooku was in his element, taking pride in his work, and Sören found it a turn-on.

"It's very good," Sören replied in French. "You deserve a lot more than a Michelin star, you deserve an entire sky of stars." He thought of Nolo's eyes, long ago, that same light in the fire of Dooku's spirit, the Noldorin craft manifesting itself through food in this world, this life.

Other-Dooku's cheeks turned pink and he smiled adorably. "You are too kind, monsieur. I am glad you enjoy it. *Bon appetit.*"

Bone appetit, all right. Sören couldn't help staring at Other-Dooku as he walked off - this one also took care of himself, a nice trim body, a firm, tight ass.

Sören had come here seeking comfort from another version of his partners while he felt things were too raw and overwhelming to go home and deal with the mess there. But he knew now, watching Other-Dooku walk around to inquire of each patron if they were satisfied, that it wouldn't be so easy to just approach this world's Maglor and Dooku like "Nice boots, want to fuck?"

Sören decided not to get dessert. He needed to give himself a valid reason to come back here. He also wanted to eat... something else - the longer he stayed here, the more tempted he would be to barge into the kitchen and throw himself at the hot older chef.

Once Sören's meal was finished and the bill paid, he drew upon his "download" from

Muninn and went into town, to visit the stores. He bought a laptop to put in his bug-out bag, just in case there was information the ravens felt he was better off looking up himself, and then, on impulse, he bought a few small canvases, an easel, and a set of paints, which could fit into the big backpack. He hadn't painted in years, apart from Elanora's guitar, but while he was in Étretat, following Monet's footsteps, he was going to paint at least once.

Eventually.

After his shopping trip, Sören had some time to unwind in his hotel suite - he was relieved his bug-out bag had been untouched while he was out - and instead of putting his new laptop in his bug-out bag right away, he took advantage of the free wi-fi and perched in the nook at the bay window overlooking the garden, doing some research on Nicholas Decaux, the owner and head chef of *Chant de la sirène*. There wasn't a whole lot available, since he seemed to eschew social media - Sören wondered if that was consistent across the multiverse - but he was able to glean that like his world's Dooku, this Nicholas was a Comte Decaux, only of French aristocracy, not Romanian. Sören wondered if his own counterpart was still Icelandic here, since this world's Dooku was a Decaux, but he didn't want to try to look himself up.

He felt a little agitated now, restless. Even though he'd done a lot of walking today, he still needed to get out. He found himself heading to the beach again, just in time for the golden hour, and walked along the pebbled shore to watch the first colors of sunset. He sat for the show, looking out at the same Porte d'Aval that Monet had painted, in the blazing sunset sky. He wished he'd brought his new paint set and one of the canvases, but he could come back here tomorrow. In the meantime, he snapped some photos with his cell phone, wanting to preserve the memory.

Then he saw them. Nicholas Decaux was walking down the beach, hand-in-hand with Maglor. Nicholas was out of his chef's uniform - he was wearing a black T-shirt, which showed off his pecs and his sculpted biceps, the veins in his arms, the dusting of white fur - and he was wearing *jeans*, which made Sören's jaw drop... but it was unmistakably him. Maglor was wearing a Pink Floyd "Dark Side of the Moon" T-shirt and darker blue jeans, his magnificent long hair stirring in the sea breeze. They paused for a few minutes, and Nicholas put an arm around Maglor's waist as they looked out at the waves. Sören discretely snapped a photo of them too, feeling guilty about it, but he could at least prove to the others where he'd been when he got back.

It was after nine PM, so Sören's guess was either that Nicholas had left early or he was on break. Recalling his vision in the mini-portal, Sören wondered if this was a daily habit. He thought about going to them now and thanking Nicholas again for a lovely meal but that seemed awkward. He needed to break the ice somehow, but... he needed time to think. He knew he couldn't stay here too long - he assumed because time flowed differently a few days out here might only be a few hours in his world, but he didn't want to be wrong about that, so it was best to not be here longer than a week, and that meant if he was going to interact with this world's Maglor and Nicholas, he needed to think fast. But he couldn't bring himself to try to go over there tonight.

He hoped they'd come back tomorrow. Looking out at the sunset, feeling the urge to paint, he would definitely be coming back tomorrow.

Chapter 15

The next day, Sören returned to the beach in the afternoon. This time he had his bug-out bag with him, since it was easier to haul the paints and canvas around that way. He also wanted some water for the walk, doing exploring before he settled down on the beach to paint.

He spent time wandering the grassy meadows of the clifftops, visiting Chapel Notre-Dame de la Garde, and looking at the rock samphire and wild cabbage, the falcons and cormorants. He sat in the grass and admired the view of the ocean from the cliff, and when he climbed down the steps and started down the trail his breath caught at the white chalk cliffs, the way the arch looked like an elephant's trunk as he strolled along the pebble beach.

And then something else caught his attention - the sound of music. Specifically, the sound of a harp. Sure enough, there was Maglor and Nicholas, having a picnic on the beach, with Maglor sitting on a stool playing his harp.

The more things change, the more they stay the same. Sören found the consistency strangely comforting, and once again he wondered if Nicholas knew the truth of who Maglor was... if Nicholas remembered who *he* was. Sören had so many more questions than answers. But he had to take one thing at a time, and first and foremost, he needed to do the thing he came here to do. He unrolled his sleeping bag onto the beach to make a somewhat softer place for sitting, then he set up his canvas and easel and paints. He had the perfect soundtrack to paint to.

As Maglor's harp chimed and sparkled, Sören's mind's eye recalled happier times in Maglor's life. He found himself painting the Porte d'Aval, as Monet once had, but more photorealistic - and surrealistic, in saturated, ramped-up dreamlike colors that had been characteristic of when he used to paint years ago. He also found himself transforming the seascape, making light shine through the arch like a gate between worlds, and in the distance, swan boats sailed on the sea.

It occurred to Sören as he put the finishing touches on the painting that this was uncannily reminiscent of [his first encounter with Maglor in 2009](#), when Sören had been enjoying himself at a cafe and a certain "Alejandro Magalhães" was performing with an acoustic guitar, and Sören had fallen under the spell of his music and found himself compelled to paint, gifting "Alejandro" at the end of the performance with the canvas to thank him for his music. Once Sören deemed his painting sufficiently complete, he took off his wedding ring, putting it securely in the pouch of Silmarils - feeling a little guilty as he did - and strode over to where Maglor and Nicholas were lounging with glasses of white wine, carrying the canvas, feeling just as shy as he had that fateful day in 2009, hoping they wouldn't hate it.

Maglor paused mid-sip as he watched Sören approach, and Nicholas put his glass down and looked over his shoulder. Sören gave a nervous little wave and flashed a disarming smile before he took another step and cleared his throat. "Hi," he said in French. "Sorry to disturb you, but I really enjoyed your music and I hope you'll accept this token of my appreciation, a way to say thank you for your gift. For making the world a more beautiful place with your artistry."

Maglor's mouth opened but he said nothing. Sören's breath caught - he was so gorgeous with his chiseled face, those eyes, that hair, it was like seeing him for the first time.

Sören's stomach fluttered as he held out the canvas.

Maglor and Nicholas took a few moments to study it in silence. Sören took a step back and shifted his weight from one foot to the other, rubbing his beard, running a hand through his now-short curls, feeling awkward, feeling like he'd just done something creepy. "I know I'm not Monet -"

"No, you're not Monet," Maglor said in a hushed voice, reverent. "You're better." Maglor looked back up at Sören and smiled, taking Sören's breath away again.

Sören giggled, face on fire. "You're too kind. I'm not better than Monet, you don't have to give false praise -"

"On the contrary," Nicholas said. "My husband is very opinionated. He would not be rude if he didn't like it, but he would not lavish false praise, either." Then Nicholas spoke in English - the same velvety bass Sören's Dooku had, but with a French accent instead of a well-bred London accent. Still deliciously sexy - Sören's cock began to stiffen at the sound of that voice. "Your French is very good, monsieur, but I can tell by your accent you are not a native speaker and you must excuse me but an improper accent is like nails on chalkboard to me."

Sören laughed again. "No offense taken," he replied in English. *Definitely the more things change, the more they stay the same.* That snootiness was so Dooku it hurt. "And thank you for the vote of confidence. I'm glad you don't hate it."

"Not at all. I want to get a frame for this and hang it in our living room," Maglor said, and Nicholas nodded.

"It should be in a museum," Nicholas added. "Tell me, do you have any work in a gallery that I might purchase? Do you take commissions?"

"I'm not local," Sören said. *Understatement of the year.*

"I knew that," Nicholas said, with an indulgent smile like he was speaking with a child - Sören's face burned again, realizing how idiotic he'd just sounded - and then Nicholas continued, "but one does not have to be local to accept a commission, *non?*"

"Depends on what you want," Sören said. "I'm just visiting. I'm backpacking across Europe -" He gestured over to where his bug-out bag sat on his sleeping bag rolled out on the shingle beach. "So I won't be here longer than a few days. But theoretically I could paint another canvas in a day or two. I don't want you to think I was gifting you with the expectation of money, though. It really was a gift, no strings attached, I'm not asking for money. I've got enough."

"I wasn't offering as a form of charity," Nicholas said. "I agree with my husband, you've got talent on par with one of the old masters."

Sören laughed again, wanting to drill a hole in the beach, crawl in, and die. He was glad they liked it but he didn't know how to accept this sort of compliment. "Thank you."

"And..." Nicholas cocked his head to one side. "You seem vaguely familiar to me. Have we met before?"

"I was a customer yesterday at your restaurant," Sören said.

"Ah, yes. But..." Nicholas shook his head and stroked his beard, thinking. "It still feels like I know you from somewhere."

Sören shrugged, though of course he knew why Nicholas was saying that, even though Nicholas didn't know. *Yes, of course you know me, Nolo.* "I doubt it. You're French, yeah? This is my first time visiting France." That was a lie - Soren had visited France in his world, with Maglor, in 2010, but he hadn't gotten to see all of it; this was his first time seeing Normandy, and Étretat.

"And I've never been to Australia," Nicholas said, nodding. "That is where you're from, I assume, though there's... something else in your accent."

"Icelandic," Sören said. "I've been living in Australia for the last twelve years but I'm from Iceland originally."

"Interesting," Maglor said, raising an eyebrow.

Not as interesting as you, Macalaurë, Sören thought but didn't say aloud. Sören shifted his weight again, feeling vaguely annoyed that his accent was instantly recognized as Australian rather than Icelandic - that his cultural identity was shifting much more towards Australian than Icelandic. He didn't hate living in Australia, but he still felt like he was losing himself and that bothered him, feeling rootless. His eyes met Maglor's again and he wondered if Maglor felt like this but worse, wandering as long as he had.

"Would you care for a glass of chardonnay?" Nicholas asked, gesturing to the wine bottle.

"All right," Sören said.

"Come. Join us." Nicholas patted the blanket and smile.

Sören's mind's eye immediately played a fantasy of Nicholas saying that in the bedroom. He pushed that thought away, not wanting to get his hopes up, even though that had in fact been why he'd hopped universes, wanting to seek comfort and release from a version of his partners before he went home to deal with the fallout of Dag's death... and what would be the fallout of him running away. Sören knew he was potentially looking at a dry spell, so he might as well make this trip count.

After a few moments of sipping wine and watching the waves, Nicholas spoke again. "Remarkable," he said, studying the painting. "You are a true talent, monsieur."

Sören crinkled his nose and bit his lower lip, cheeks flushed again. "Thank you."

"I'm sorry, I did not ask your name. I am normally not this impolite, but you must excuse me, I am enthralled by your painting." Their eyes met and Nicholas gave that charming, adorable little smile again. Sören's cock throbbed.

"Sören." It felt so weird to be using his given name when he'd been living as Stefan for twelve years... and once again he wondered about his counterpart in this world. It was obvious Nicholas and Maglor hadn't found him yet, or their paths had only crossed briefly. Sören wondered if there was some unwritten law of multiverse travel that he was breaking now - if it was going to make it that much harder for his counterpart if and when he met them, not remembering this encounter. But it was a little too late now to put the proverbial worms back in the can, and maybe there was a way for him to arrange a meeting between them, with an icebreaker about the layered reality of their existence, a conversation they would need to have regardless.

"I'm Nicholas, and this is my partner Mark," Nicholas said. Maglor gave a little wave; Nicholas reached to take Sören's hand, his grip firm. His touch made Sören tingle all over.

"It's nice to see such a happy couple," Sören said. "I'm queer too."

Nicholas nodded. "I had already assumed that if there was a problem, you wouldn't be socializing with us."

"No, just the opposite. You guys are cute together." Sören smiled back, hoping the flirting wasn't too heavyhanded or would be offensive. "How long have you been together, if you don't mind me asking?"

"Twenty years, this year," Nicholas said. Then he quickly added, "Mark was twenty-two when we met." He gave a too-hearty fake laugh that let Sören know he was aware "Mark" hadn't aged a day since then.

Sören glanced over at Maglor and raised an eyebrow. "Age has been very kind to you," Sören said, swirling the wine around in his glass before he took a long sip.

"Healthy living," Maglor replied in a flat tone of voice, like he was trying to be nonchalant and not make a big issue of the fact that he didn't age and Sören was suspicious. "Which is easy enough to do out here."

"I bet. Just from the bits that I've seen, this is a beautiful place to live, you guys are very lucky." Sören looked back out at the sea, and the arch of the Porte d'Aval. He was almost sure now that was a portal, that his painting hadn't *just* been a flight of fancy.

Nicholas nodded slowly, looking out to sea. "My family is from Rouen and when I was young, we went to Étretat on holiday. I fell in love with this place, and after I finished culinary school, this was where I decided to settle down."

"I'm not surprised you went to culinary school," Sören said. "The meal I had at your restaurant was really excellent."

"I went to Le Cordon Bleu." That smile again. "And thank you." Nicholas glanced back at the painting, then at Sören. "I know you said this is a gift for Mark's music, but it is truly magnificent. I feel we should give you something in return."

Maglor nodded enthusiastically. "I was going to suggest that myself."

"Would you like a free meal at the restaurant? Dinner? Or luncheon? Though if you choose dinner, you can be our guest, a special meal after the restaurant closes."

"Oh. Wow." Sören looked at Nicholas, then Maglor, then back at Nicholas. He did very much want more of that delicious cooking - and more time spent with these delicious men - but he felt a twinge of guilt about accepting a dinner invite. "I know you're in the kitchen all day and I really don't want to impose and make you do more work after close -"

Nicholas waved his hand dismissively. "It happens I have both today off, and tomorrow. Since I turned sixty, I always take Fridays and Saturdays off," Nicholas explained. "*Comme tu sais*, work-life balance is important, and it becomes even more important the older one gets, when one has fewer days left."

Sören tried to smile, but he felt a tight ache, not wanting Nicholas to grow frail and die. Of

course, he couldn't tell them *Hey, I'm immortal, want to be like me?* Even if he thought they'd be accepting and not outright dismiss him as crazy - and Sören had to remind himself this was a different version of the man he'd married in 2017, what was "normal" and "commonplace" to he and Dooku probably wasn't, here - he knew that immortality didn't guarantee happiness; giving someone eternal life in a world full of injustices and chaos was perhaps more of a curse than a blessing, and that was without the necessity of keeping it secret, the lengths one would have to go to in order to avoid detection and its consequences.

Still, the thought of leaving them with a vial of his blood before he went home was tempting.

Then Sören, draining his cup, realized Nicholas had just said "as you know" in French. He almost choked on his wine.

"Are you all right?" Maglor asked.

Sören nodded. "I'm fine." He patted his sternum. He looked Nicholas in the eye. "I'd be happy to have dinner with you this evening, yes, thank you."

"Splendid. I will provide the food, and Mark will give us a concert. He often performs in the evenings for our patrons," Nicholas said.

"I play for the love of it," Maglor told Sören, "so please don't feel like you're making me work. Performing is life."

Sören wondered about certain *other* performances, and what Maglor was like as a lover here. He got the feeling that passion was also consistent across the multiverse.

He hoped he'd find out. Soon. "Looking forward to it," Sören said.

—

Sören arrived at the restaurant at ten, feeling nervous and awkward, like a schoolboy with a crush. He relaxed a little over a glass of wine, and Maglor's music, the cascading notes of the harp conjuring a mental image of a waterfall tucked away in a boreal forest...

...the forest that had been Sören's "happy place", a mental escape since childhood. He knew now that was Formenos. He didn't know if this Maglor could sense what he was, but Sören found it interesting that this song was keyed to Formenos, as if Maglor could sense he was nervous and knew at least subconsciously this would help soothe him.

Nicholas started with appetizers - smoked salmon canapés, cheesy gougères, and Coquilles St. Jacques served in scallop shells. When dinner was served, Nicholas dimmed the lights and Maglor lit candles and lanterns at their table. Dinner was filet mignon, shrimp with an orange beurre blanc sauce, roasted asparagus, and sauteed mushrooms. Sören felt like he could have an orgasm just from the food alone.

"It's a crime you only have one Michelin star," Sören said, waving a food-filled fork like a conductor.

Nicholas chuckled and turned pink, which Sören found adorable. He fought the urge to tell Nicholas he wanted to ride him on the table for dessert. "It's an honor I have *any* Michelin

stars. *Comme tu sais*, they are very difficult to earn. I'm no Julia Child, even if I got my start with her recipes."

Sören knew enough to know Michelin stars didn't grow on trees, but the sentence assumed Sören was more cultured than he actually was; Sören realized that the little bit they knew about him - someone backpacking around Europe, who had a measure of painting skill and was keen on walking in Monet's footsteps, who didn't need money - made him probably come off like a spoiled trust fund kid, born with a silver spoon in his mouth, who would know all about Michelin-starred restaurants, who had probably eaten filet mignon far more than Sören actually had; this was only ever his third time having it in forty-eight years, and the other two times had been because of Dooku. Sören preferred a good ribeye steak, but the filet mignon was still very good and in any case he wasn't going to tell Nicholas that - Dooku thought Sören was "a heathen savage" for enjoying ribeye more than mignon.

While they mostly ate in companionable silence, savoring the wonderful food, there were bits and pieces of conversation. Nicholas did most of the talking, Maglor revealed very little of himself; Sören was sure this was to avoid having to construct an elaborate backstory to disguise his true identity, which was also why he himself was reserved with his words. Through asking Nicholas how he got into the culinary arts, it came out that Nicholas was in fact of aristocracy, just like Sören's Dooku, and had dismayed his parents by wanting to become a chef, rather than take over the family estate and holdings, which fell to his younger brother. Sören's Dooku was an only child, so Sören's curiosity was piqued by what else had changed here... if his own counterpart had siblings or not.

Which got him thinking about Dag again. Which broke his heart all over again, thinking of how bad their childhood and teenage years were, then Dag had carved out some hard-won happiness in his professional and personal lives just to be captured, held prisoner and used like a lab rat for twelve years, and had been rescued on the way home just to be murdered. Sören thought of the way Porte d'Aval looked like a gate to Valinor in his painting, and he hoped this was one world where Finrod was, in fact, walking under the trees of Valinor and had not gone through hell here.

He wondered, too, about Margrét. About Findis. He wondered how his world's Margrét was faring in the secret resistance against the Valar... if he'd ever see her again.

Sören tried to push those thoughts away, not wanting to be sad during a lighthearted evening, but the sadness started back up again once Maglor returned to the harp. Maglor started off by playing "Watermark" by Enya, which began chipping away at the dam around Sören's heart, trying desperately to hide the grief but the haunting melody made it trickle out... and then there was one of Maglor's own compositions, the music making Sören think of that painting again... the veil between worlds. Maglor not being able to go home again. Maglor remembering visits to Alqualondë, happy times with Finarfin and Finrod.

Sören missed Dag. He missed Margrét. He missed Frankie. He missed Anthony. He wondered how the Finarfin part of Anthony was coping with this; he got the feeling of *not well*.

I should go home and face the music. But Sören knew he'd already started the process of leading Nicholas and Maglor to his counterpart and he had to see that through, even if it meant it would take a little longer to get home than expected. Not just for himself, wherever Other-Sören was...

...but for Maglor, so melancholy, pouring out his eternal sorrow with each pluck of the

harp strings, like Maglor's own heartstrings, emotions and memories crystallized into being. Maglor needed his family.

Sören's heart broke for Maglor too, and that did it. Despite his best effort to hold back the tears, they spilled down his cheeks as Sören sat back, letting the music take him into vision, into the Song itself. Maglor's ache for his lost family mirrored Sören's own, mourning the tragedy of Dag's death... the trauma of Thor impersonating his brother, which would now leave long-lasting paranoia about security in the family. Sören sobbed quietly, but Nicholas noticed, and reached out to put a hand on his shoulder.

Maglor finally noticed and brought the song to a close. He came over and sat down beside Sören. "What's wrong?" he asked.

"Oh, just..." Sören sniffled. He decided to tell the truth, but not all of it. "I miss my brother."

"Oh. Do you want to call him?" Nicholas asked. "We won't mind if you wish to step outside for a few m-"

"I... I can't call him." Sören sniffled again, and broke down as he finally said it, out loud, to other people. It was real, completely, inescapably real. "He's dead. He died... recently. He was murdered."

"Ah, *Mon Dieu*, that's why you're backpacking across Europe," Nicholas said, dark eyes kind and sad. "You're trying to distract yourself from grief, *non*?"

Sören nodded and sobbed harder. He hated crying like this, feeling weak, but there was no judgment, Nicholas tenderly rubbing his shoulder. Then Maglor pulled Sören into his arms, held him tight, began to rock him, petting his curls. Maglor's lips gently brushed Sören's forehead.

Maglor looked into Sören's eyes. "I know what it's like. I have dead brothers too. One was a suicide."

"Is that why you're here in France?" Sören asked; Maglor had an accent, but it wasn't French, and of course Sören knew even if Maglor was faking a French accent, he was from "everywhere" by way of Valinor.

Maglor nodded. "I traveled to deal with my own grief. Then I found Nicholas, and it was like... finding family. Finding home." Maglor reached out to take Nicholas's hand, who squeezed.

OK, you definitely know who he is. Sören pursed his lips, practically vibrating with the need to reveal himself, as well - but it wasn't the right time.

Maglor stroked Sören's cheek, his touch feather-light, sending a shiver down Sören's spine. "This is going to sound very strange, considering you just met us, but this all seems... fated, somehow. Like you were brought to the right place at the right time. People who understand, and can help you."

"Indeed," Nicholas said. "*Comme tu sais*, I had asked you earlier if we'd met somewhere. You feel familiar to me. Here, I think." Nicholas put a hand on his heart.

"I know it hurts, and it's going to hurt for a long time," Maglor said. "Time doesn't quite heal all wounds, it just makes the pain die down from a sharp sting to a dull ache, always there in the background but you find a way to live with it."

Nicholas nodded solemnly. "Memories will still haunt you."

Sören narrowed his eyes - now he *knew* Nicholas had to know he was Fingolfin, and had probably remembered what happened to his family - but he said nothing.

"But, so long as there is life, there is the chance to make new memories. Good ones." Maglor patted Sören, then he glanced over at Nicholas, as if they were communicating something privately, by *ósanwe*. When Nicholas nodded, Maglor looked back at Sören. "How would you feel about letting us show you around tomorrow, do some sightseeing with locals instead of a tourist thing?"

Sören was touched, and excited, but... "Are you sure? I don't want to monopolize your day off -"

"Bah," Nicholas said, with a Gallic shrug. "It will be enjoyable for us, too." Nicholas skritch'd Sören's curls fondly, like Sören was a cat. "I think you should see Rouen, my hometown. If you like Monet, he painted the Rouen Cathedral, and there are paintings of his on display at Musée des Beaux-Arts."

Sören let out a squeak, and then he clapped his hand over his mouth, feeling like an idiot.

Nicholas and Maglor laughed, as if that reaction delighted them. "I think he likes that idea," Maglor said.

"There are many other famous painters on display as well: Degas, Rubens, Renoir. And the cathedral is its own work of art. You simply must let us take you there." Nicholas gave Sören that sweet little smile again.

"Twist my arm," Sören said, managing a teasing grin. It of course wasn't a cure-all, but it would get him out of his head for awhile.

"A day trip to Rouen, then I will make you a home-cooked meal at our house, *ouais?*" Nicholas raised an eyebrow.

Sören nodded. "It's a date." That word came out before he could stop himself - he couldn't be absolutely sure they'd be amenable to a tryst with him, past history did not guarantee present connections... but he was giddy all the same.

"*C'est bon*," Nicholas replied, and Maglor tousled Sören's curls.

Chapter 16

The trip to Rouen was a balm for Sören's soul. It didn't heal everything - it didn't bring back Dag, it didn't remove his survivor's guilt, or the horror that once again he had killed, and he was good at it. It didn't take away his anger at the curse on him and his entire family, his rage at his enemies... his fear of what was to come. But for some hours, Sören managed to get out of his head as Nicholas and Maglor took him to Musée des Beaux-Arts to see Monet's art in person, and that of countless other famed artists... as they toured Rouen Cathedral, itself a work of art.

"I don't like religion but it's produced some magnificent architecture," Sören said, his voice hushed as they admired the jewel-like stained glass, bright May sunshine streaming through.

"Indeed," Nicholas said. His lips quirked. "When I was a boy, I wanted to be a priest. Then the artistry of the kitchen became my religion."

Sören said nothing, but reflected on how his own Dooku had also aspired to be a priest at one time. He wondered if there were any universes where he'd followed through... and realized, his hair standing on end, it was Fingolfin's guilt for their "sin". Fingolfin had pushed Fëanor away at the end, thinking they were punished well before the Doom began, not wanting to heap more of that upon them.

The crypt was only permissible to view on a guided tour of the cathedral, and Nicholas wanted to show Sören the cathedral himself - that was just as well, as Sören felt looking at graves so soon after the incident with "Dag" might break him and he didn't want that. And even without seeing the crypt, Sören got utterly lost taking in the stained glass and every exquisitely rendered detail of the nave and the towers, the transept and tympanum. They stood in Archevêché, the very place where Joan of Arc was tried and convicted. There was so very much to look at and reflect upon, it was almost overwhelming.

They had taken the train to Rouen, even though Nicholas and Maglor both drove, because Nicholas thought the train route was more scenic. He was correct - Sören looked out the window both ways, but on the return trip he found himself getting nervous about the impending dinner at Nicholas and Maglor's very own home, and he couldn't keep himself from glancing over at them every now and again...

...admiring them, their love just as beautiful as the art and architecture he'd enjoyed today, the greenery of the Norman countryside rolling by now. This version of Nicholas seemed much more relaxed and jovial than Dooku - he'd had the advantage of more years with a partner, and a less stressful career than Dooku having been a barrister for decades. Maglor's smile broke Sören's heart. Wherever Maglor was, in any universe, Sören wanted him to find peace, find family, find happiness.

Sören felt a sharp stab of guilt, thinking of his own Dooku and Maglor. Thinking of Anthony. Thinking of *his children*, feeling like he'd failed as a parent for running off like this, spending the day *frollicking* in Rouen while everyone dealt with the fallout at home. He knew from his own experience of childhood how traumatic it could be for a child to wonder if their parent was ever coming back, if their parent had gotten hurt or killed out there... if their parent had abandoned them. The very last thing Sören wanted was for Sören, Kate or Tori to feel unloved, unwanted.

I have to go back, Sören thought to himself, instinctively reaching for the mini-portal in his

jeans pocket. He thought about just canceling dinner and heading back at once... but that was rude.

It was also, Sören realized, not wise. If there was a counterpart of himself in this world - and he had a feeling there was - he ran the risk of making things difficult for his other-self if his path crossed Nicholas and Maglor's at some point in the future and he didn't remember having met them, let alone abruptly rejecting their hospitality. And once again Sören felt guilt, like he'd unintentionally fucked things up for his other-self, getting in the way, making things weird and complicated. Sören was sure Nicholas knew who Maglor was, and may have figured out being Fingolfin in a past life... but there was that and there was trying to explain coming from another universe, and why he'd just run out when his partners were back at home.

Fuck. Sören pinched the bridge of his nose.

Nicholas's eyes met his and Nicholas's bushy eyebrows shot up, eyes widening with concern. "Are you all right?"

Sören nodded. "Yeah, just... thinking. Too much."

"Well, soon, we will get your mind off your troubles, *non?*" Nicholas gave a small, cryptic smile, and his eyes raked Sören up and down. Sören's cheeks burned and his cock stirred uncomfortably in his jeans. He had the feeling Nicholas and Maglor would be on the menu, and whether he was interfering with the natural course of events for his counterpart or not, he was *hungry*. He needed relief from the madness that had gripped him for days, like a bad fever dream.

Though Nicholas was a titled count, he lived modestly, in a small rustic Mediterranean-style cottage with a grey stone veneer and gabled roofs of darker grey tile. Cheery yellow roses climbed up the house, and there were rose bushes around the outside of the property, and clusters of herbs. Sören smiled at an enormous buff-colored tabby in the front window, his head cocked to one side, with a somewhat confused expression on its face.

As soon as they got in the door Nicholas began to baby talk to the cat in French, which made Sören bite his lip, trying not to die laughing at the cultured six-foot-five gentleman with the deep, resonant voice talking baby talk to a cat. Then Sören couldn't help his laughter as the very large cat squeaked like a three-month old kitten.

Nicholas picked the cat up, who began to purr loudly, and walked the cat over. "This is Penuche," Nicholas said.

Sören let the cat sniff his hand, then offered gentle pets. Penuche nuzzled his hand.

"He's adorable," Sören said. "Er, he? She?"

"He," Nicholas said, nodding with a little smile. He gave Penuche a kiss and put Penuche down on the three-story beige cat tree in the window. Maglor walked over to give Penuche pettings - Sören grinned as Penuche rubbed up against him and headbutted him - and then Nicholas clapped his hands together and said, "I will get started on dinner. If you need any refreshments in the meantime, Maca - Mark... will be happy to serve you."

Sören felt his eyebrows go up but he said nothing, just nodded as Nicholas walked off. As he watched Nicholas's tight ass, he thought to himself *He knows who "Mark" is.*

Sören's eyes met Maglor's.

"Would you like a little before-dinner concert, while you wait?" Maglor asked.

"I would." Then Sören gave a small clear of his throat and took off his backpack. He'd pushed with the Force to get the gun past the metal detectors at the museum and the cathedral - while he'd tipped the staff well at the hotel where he'd been staying, he didn't feel comfortable leaving his survival bag there all day... and especially not if he was spending the night as he suspected he might be, this evening. Now he was careful to keep the contents of the bag as contained as possible as he produced one of the blank canvases he'd bought, and his paint set. "Is it all right if I paint?" Sören looked down at the hardwood floor, then the cashmere sofa and armchairs, the blue-and-grey throw rugs. Everything seemed expensive and he worried about making a mess with his paint.

"Sure," Maglor said. "Let me get some newspaper to put down."

Once the newspaper was readied, Sören sat on the couch and set up, while Maglor lugged out his harp, sat down on one of the armchairs and did scales. Penuche wandered over to sit on the couch pillow next to Sören, and Sören wondered if the cat was going to upset the paint - that had happened a fair few times in Sören's life - but instead Penuche just made another tiny kitten squeak and headbutted his arm. Sören laughed and gave the cat some pettings before he stared at the blank canvas, gently waving his brush in time like a conductor's baton to Maglor's warmup.

At last Maglor began to play, something joyous, bright and shimmering that reminded Sören of Cocteau Twins. Sören painted Maglor at his harp, in a garden of white roses... with the magic of his harp, his voice, radiating a golden light that turned the roses gold, a few butterflies dancing in a mist of golden sparkles. In the distance was Fingolfin, a flood of raven hair, wearing a black silk robe like the kind Sören's Dooku had, opened invitingly as he reclined, propped up on one elbow, watching with magnetic, intense blue eyes. It looked like Maglor was serenading him.

This is a song he composed for Ñolofinwë, Sören thought to himself, listening to Maglor sing in a language he knew was Quenya. Sören broke out in gooseflesh, a shiver down his spine, his hair standing on end. Despite the Doom, Maglor and Fingolfin had loved each other enough to find each other again here... and countless other worlds, Sören knew. Sören felt a fierce, tight ache in his chest at the rightness of it, the beauty of it. He loved them both so much, and he wanted them to love and live again, wherever they were.

They need to find this world's version of me. Or Anthony. If we exist. They deserve to have their family, their beloveds, again. Sören found himself gripping the troll cross he wore on a leather lanyard under his shirt, hoping his son would understand when he explained it to them. That he couldn't just leave Fingolfin behind to fend for himself, this time.

If killing Odin and the others in my world was like cutting off the head of a hydra, weakening the others across the multiverse... this is strengthening all of us. Sören quickly kissed the troll cross, thinking of his son, silently pleading for forgiveness from however many universes away, before he slipped it back under his shirt.

Sören looked at the painting again, and swallowed hard. He knew from Nicholas's slip, almost saying "Macalaurë", that Nicholas knew beyond a doubt who and what Maglor was. He had to, if they'd been together for twenty years and "Mark" hadn't aged a day. But that didn't mean Nicholas remembered being Fingolfin, and he worried now that the man

in the distance of the painting would offend Nicholas...

"Dinner will be ready in five minutes," Nicholas said, stepping into the doorway of the living room.

Maglor stopped playing, got up and stretched, and walked over to see what Sören had painted to his music. Nicholas also came over.

Here goes nothing. Sören took a deep breath. "This is to say thank you for today," he said softly.

Nicholas and Maglor stood on either side of the canvas, staring at it. Maglor's eyebrows shot up, and Nicholas's eyes widened and his jaw dropped. Nicholas blinked slowly, looking completely dumbfounded.

Oh god. Sören couldn't breathe. For an instant, it felt like the entire world stopped, judgment hanging in the balance as Nicholas and Maglor continued to stare at the painting in shock.

Then Maglor grabbed Sören's arm, a bit rough, and yanked him up to his feet. Before Sören could ask if he'd overstepped his bounds, Maglor leaned in, took Sören's face in his hands, and kissed him hard.

Sören kissed him back with all the fire of his being, all the hunger of being touch-starved, comfort-starved these last few days since the horror. Sören moaned as their tongues met, his cock leaping to attention, throbbing as their tongues stroked, twirled, teased.

They pulled apart, breathing hard, and then Nicholas turned Sören to him, his dark eyes soft. For a moment he just stroked Sören's cheek with a tender little smile on his face, then he kissed Sören's brow, and his lips slid down to kiss the tip of Sören's nose, making Sören giggle, before their mouths crushed together and Nicholas was kissing him deeply, fiercely, pressed against him so Sören could feel Nicholas's own hardness. Sören's cock twitched, and it was all he could do to not reach up and start unbuttoning Nicholas's shirt, wanting them both *now*.

Nicholas led Sören by the hand. "Dinner first," he scolded, eyes twinkling. "Then... you are on the menu for dessert, *mon chéri*."

Dinner was served in the back, in a walled garden filled with more herbs and climbing roses. Lanterns were lit on the glass-topped iron table, and the meal was artfully arranged on bone china - ratatouille and sides of balsamic glazed carrots and sausage risotto, slices of crusty homemade French baguettes, and glasses of Red Bordeaux. It was delicious, but Sören felt like he was going to explode with sexual frustration, and the sensual way Nicholas and Maglor were eating and giving him seductive glances didn't help.

After dinner and cleanup, with Sören's paints put away in his backpack, they lounged in the living room with more red wine - and Sören sitting on Nicholas's lap, Nicholas's hand rubbing Sören's knee, then sliding up Sören's thigh and back down. When Sören finished

his glass - trying not to gulp it down, he knew he could troll his Dooku, but they had been together for years; Sören didn't want to test his luck with these men he'd just met - Sören turned to Nicholas and affectionately skritchd his beard, making Nicholas's face light up with a silly smile before he took Sören's hand and kissed it.

Sören was so horny that he threw caution to the wind, etiquette be damned. "So... when do we fuck?"

Maglor blinked, then his laughter rang out, joining Nicholas's. Nicholas's cheeks turned pink, his eyes sparkling. Nicholas gave Sören another kiss, his hand moving from where it had been caressing Sören's thigh to rub the hard bulge in Sören's jeans. "I like you," Nicholas said.

"Good." Sören crinkled his nose and bit his lower lip.

They kissed again, and again. This time Sören did give into his impulse to unbutton Nicholas's shirt, moaning at the sight of the silvery chest hair. Sören's cock throbbed as he ran his fingers through it, enjoying the feel. Wanting to feel Nicholas's fur rubbing all over him.

Nicholas began to kiss Sören's neck, palming Sören's erection more insistently. Sören heard himself whimper - his neck was so sensitive - and after their mouths met again, Maglor got up. Sören grinned at the sight of Maglor's tented jeans, and let out a squeak as Maglor picked him up off Nicholas's lap and began carrying him like he weighed nothing, towards the bedroom.

They showered first, kissing and sensually lathering each other. When Sören had been thoroughly soaped and rinsed, Maglor dropped to his knees behind Sören and licked his way down Sören's sensitive spine before he buried his face in Sören's ass, tongue teasing inside him, while Nicholas kissed him more insistently, Sören's hands running over Nicholas's trim, silver-pelted body as their hard cocks rubbed together.

Before Sören could come, pent up as he was, the feel of Maglor's tongue in him and Nicholas's cock on his driving him mad, they got out of the shower, dried off, and fell on each other on the bed, taking turns kissing, hands exploring. Sören was *hungry*, thoroughly possessed by lust, and he found himself taking both Nicholas and Maglor's cocks in his mouth, almost choking, sucking them feverishly as he looked up at them, watching them kiss, the erotic sight making his cock ache. Sören sucked and sucked, greedy for it, feeling that old devil-may-care, decadent debauched attitude of his younger years. It wasn't quite the same as having sex with a stranger, but it still felt new and exciting.

When Sören's jaw got tired, he licked at their cocks, chasing the precum with his tongue, until Maglor grabbed a fistful of his curls to pull him up. Sören briefly regretted cutting his hair - they would have had more to grab onto - but he couldn't even think once Maglor's mouth was on his, their tongues playing together, before Nicholas took Sören's face and kissed him.

"We want to spoil such a sweet, thoughtful boy," Nicholas husked, his finger tracing circles around Sören's nipple, hardening it.

With that, Nicholas and Maglor gently pushed Sören back against the pillows and proceeded to kiss and lick him all over, hands stroking, fingers brushing, giving him gooseflesh and shivers as his cock got harder and harder, balls agonizingly tight. Sören cried out as they sucked his nipples at the same time, and again as they kissed, licked,

and rubbed his sensitive stomach. Maglor's eyes locked with Sören's as his tongue traced the flames on Sören's right arm.

Nicholas kissed and nuzzled the waves on Sören's left arm. "I normally do not care for piercings and tattoos," Nicholas said in that delightful French accent, "but on you it is beautiful. On you it is art."

"Yes," Maglor said. "There's a story with the phoenixes on your back."

Sören nodded. "I tried to kill myself and it was based on the first painting I made... after." It felt a little weird telling them when they hadn't known each other for very long - though they of course felt deeply familiar - but there was only compassion in their eyes, no judgment. Sören briefly wondered if his counterpart here had the same body modifications.

Then Nicholas took Sören's chin in his hand, stroked the beard tenderly, ran his thumb over Sören's full lips. "I am glad you are still with us, making art. And tonight... we live."

They kissed again, and Sören moaned into the kiss, cock jolting. Nicholas laughed softly and kissed and nibbled Sören's neck, playing with his cock, before he kissed back down Sören's body.

At last they found their way into a daisy chain, Sören sucking Nicholas as Nicholas sucked Maglor and Maglor sucked Sören, then before they could come Sören sucked Maglor, who sucked Nicholas, who sucked Sören. Maglor came first, whimpering around Nicholas's cock as his seed flooded Sören's mouth, and that set Sören off, coming with a cry. Nicholas gave a deep groan as he tasted Sören, then as Sören lay there, dazed, lost in bliss, he watched Nicholas kiss Maglor, sharing Sören's seed, and Sören's cock hardened right up again.

Nicholas smiled, delighted. He leaned down to kiss Sören - letting him taste the lingering notes of his essence - and then he purred, "You must give me a little while to recharge, pet. I am not as young as I used to be."

It didn't take that long, however, as they kissed some more and Maglor joined in. Sören sighed at the sight of Nicholas's hard cock... aching for it inside him.

Seeming to sense his need, Nicholas said, "We don't have condoms. We haven't needed them..."

Sören nodded. He was prepared to hear no - it wasn't like he wouldn't enjoy sucking them again - but he still said, truthfully, "I don't have anything." He left out the part that he was immune to those types of diseases, being immortal.

Nicholas and Maglor looked at each other, and Sören guessed they were communicating via ósanwe, or Force telepathy - Sören wondered if they were Force sensitive, if that was a thing here or not - and then they glanced back at Sören and nodded, as if they'd reached a private consensus. "All right," Nicholas said. He smirked. "Are you top or bottom?"

"Yes," Sören said.

Nicholas and Maglor laughed, and then they kissed him again. "Here," Maglor said, rolling onto his back, pulling Sören atop him, "I want to feel that ring."

Sören grinned and kissed him. As Nicholas got out the lubricant, Sören and Maglor kissed, cock rubbing cock; the feel of Maglor's cock teasing his and the thought of being inside him brought Sören close to that edge, hoping he wouldn't pop off right away.

When Maglor was ready, Sören took him. He kept it slow at first, to keep from coming too soon, wanting to focus on Maglor's pleasure. He also gave Nicholas a show, admiring the sight of Nicholas stroking himself as he watched Sören's cock glide in and out of Maglor.

After a few kisses, Nicholas got behind Sören, and Sören's breath hitched as he felt the tip of Nicholas's cock at his opening. Nicholas wrapped his arms around Sören and tenderly nuzzled his neck as he pushed inside, and that feeling of being held, the gentleness, went right to Sören's heart, tears stinging his eyes as his lips crushed Maglor's again.

Sören fucked Maglor in the same rhythm as Nicholas fucking him. The feel of Nicholas's veiny, slightly upcurved cock stroking that sweet spot inside him, as Maglor's silken heat kissed his cock over and over, drove Sören mad with sensation. He loved the way Nicholas kissed and nibbled his neck and shoulder, the lust in Maglor's eyes. When they moved together harder, faster, Maglor's hips rolling back at Sören as Sören reached down to stroke Maglor's hard, slick cock, Nicholas licked up the shell of Sören's ear and rasped, *"Tu as un si beau corps, mon gentil garçon. Si vous deviez rester un moment ici avec nous, ce serait un défi de ne pas vous retirer de mon travail, afin que je puisse passer toute la journée au lit avec vous, faisant plaisir à votre corps délicieux et tentant pendant des heures et des heures."*

"Oh god." Sören bit his lower lip and let out a whine, almost undone by the sound of Nicholas speaking French. Then Maglor squeezed his inner walls around Sören's cock with a smug, I-have-you-now smirk on his face. Sören heard himself growl and he bit Maglor's neck, savage, as he let Maglor have it, pounding away, jerking Maglor's cock so hard it made his wrist hurt. Nicholas groaned and tugged on Sören's short curls as he licked Sören's neck.

They all came together, gasping, shouting their release. Sören got chills at the beauty of it, the power, feeling one with them, so close. In that long moment of wild peace, everything melted away and there was only the euphoria, the pleasure, safe as he was held between them.

In every universe, they belonged. Sören buried his face in Maglor's chest, listening to the thunder of his heart, and wept silently. It felt so right, and yet, this wasn't his world. His partners needed him, he needed them - and this world's version needed to find their version of him, and Anthony, also.

How to make that happen?

Sören let himself slip back into the bliss, and rest. Right now this was all that mattered, all that existed, their love across worlds.

Chapter 17

In the middle of the night Sören was woken up by Maglor's feverish kisses, and Sören responded, matching fire for fire, kissing Maglor back, caressing him, playing with his hair, grinding their hard cocks together. Nicholas stirred awake and watched them, stroking himself, until they were ready for another round. This time Nicholas lay on his back and Sören straddled him and sank down on his cock. Maglor watched them with hungry eyes as Sören rode Nicholas slowly, sensually, Nicholas's hands playing over Sören's body, and at last Maglor came around behind Sören and held him, the strong wall of his chest against Sören's back, as he pushed inside. It was a tight fit, but Sören loved it, giving himself, surrendering completely, riding Nicholas as Maglor's hips slapped against his, cock fucking cock, pleasure building with each push and pull until Sören climaxed, spilling over Nicholas's chest, moaning as he felt Nicholas and Maglor coming together inside him, savoring the feel of their molten flow.

He dozed off for awhile, sandwiched between them, content, and woke up again to a cold spot in the bed. He opened his eyes and saw Maglor getting dressed.

"I usually go for a walk along the beach first thing in the morning," Maglor explained, keeping his voice down.

Of course you do, Sören thought to himself, thinking of the canon, Maglor wandering the world endlessly, singing laments along the shore. It broke Sören's heart that even here - everywhere, it seemed - the Doom still left its scars on Maglor's soul. Sören sat up. "Mind if I join you?" He wanted to offer some comfort, if he could.

Nicholas also sat up. "You can count me in as well," he said, his French accent heavier with sleep.

Maglor smiled. "It's a party, then."

Once Sören was dressed, he reached in his jeans pockets to make sure the pouch of Silmarils, and the mini-portal, were still there, which was force of habit. They were - though touching the mini-portal gave Sören another stab of guilt. *You need to go home to your kids.*

"Are you all right?" Maglor asked, raising an eyebrow.

Sören nodded, looking away. "I'm fine," he said, though he had a feeling Maglor knew he wasn't fine, really.

They walked along the pebble beach, deserted and quiet at this hour, Sören holding both Nicholas and Maglor's hands, watching the deeper blue twilight fade and brighten into a softer blue streaked with puffs of soft pastel pink and buttercup-gold and lavender and peach, reflecting into the sea, washing the white cliffs of Étretat with color. It was the sort of sky Sören would have loved to paint, and maybe, someday he would. In the meantime he had an idea - he was going to need to explain where he'd been when he eventually went back. "Can I take some pictures with you guys?" Sören asked. "Last night was really wonderful and I'd like a souvenir."

Nicholas and Maglor considered, then nodded. "You may," Nicholas said.

"Though, please don't post these on any social media," Maglor said. "We try to keep a

private life."

I bet, Sören thought to himself, wondering what Maglor's deal was in this universe - if he had to move around and change identities, how often - and then he took out his cell phone, still not able to believe it worked as usual out here, and as Huginn and Muninn flew in the distance, Sören snapped some selfies with his new lovers, and some photos of just Nicholas and Maglor, a view of "the elephant trunk" of the cliffs in the background.

Sören put the phone back in his pocket and then Nicholas gave him a hug, rubbing his nose in Sören's curls, kissing the top of Sören's head. "You are a very sweet boy, wanting a souvenir of us," Nicholas said.

Maglor came up behind Sören and hugged him too. "You know, you could stay awhile," Maglor said, giving him a squeeze. "We'd be happy to have you as a guest."

Sören sighed. He didn't know how to answer that without breaking Maglor's heart - and his own - unless he revealed all right then. He closed his eyes, thinking of his family back home in Australia, remembering that time flowed differently across the universe, wondering how long he'd been gone in terms of real-time where he came from... and then he opened his eyes and looked out at the dreamy, sweet pastel sky, the rolling waves...

...something bright gleaming in the waves, like a very large diamond or a lamp. As the tide rolled in, the shining light was rushing forward.

Oh my fucking god. Sören couldn't believe it. Huginn and Muninn were circling now. Sören broke the hug, reluctantly, and made a beeline for where the light was about to come in. As Sören approached, the light rose up out of the water and began floating to his waiting hands. The Silmaril pulsed in his hands like a heartbeat, warm, almost blindingly bright.

Sören swallowed hard and walked back over to where Nicholas and Maglor were watching, waiting, looking absolutely stunned. Sören held out his hand, offering the Silmaril to Maglor. "Here," he said softly. "I believe this belongs to you, Macalaurë Fëanorion."

Maglor's jaw dropped and his eyes widened. He took a step back, shaking, breathing harder, then he pointed at Sören - for the first time Sören realized Maglor was glamouring his burned hand and the glamour dropped - and then Maglor finally made words. "How... wh-"

Sören took a deep breath. Looking around to make absolutely sure there was nobody else on the beach who could see, he glamoured himself, taking a cue from Dooku who had made himself younger, beardless, long-haired and blue-eyed, the spitting image of Fingolfin - now Sören let his hair fall in long, silky waves, faded away his beard, changed his eyes from brown to grey. Maglor fell to his knees and let out a sob. "Adar."

"I have a lot of explaining to do," Sören said, tears coming to his eyes - Nicholas's own eyes were too bright - and then Sören dropped the glamour, returning to his usual human appearance. He rubbed his beard instinctively. Then he proffered the Silmaril again. "It won't burn you this time, Kanafinwë."

Maglor took it, hand shaking, and then he pulled Sören against him and held him tight, tight, weeping. Sören wept too.

Huginn and Muninn flew over. Huginn sat on Maglor's head and Muninn perched on Sören's shoulder. Sören got another mental "download", seeing the events of this world's

Years of the Trees and First Age flash in his mind's eye. Things had been much the same as where he'd come from, right down to the incest.

Right down to the Doom.

Sören stroked the burns on Maglor's free hand. Maglor's other hand tightened around the Silmaril, unburnt.

Nicholas came over, giving the ravens a confused look, and put a hand over Sören's hand on Maglor's hand. "Let's head back and then you can... explain, *non?*"

Sören nodded.

Nicholas's lips quirked with an almost-smile. "It is good to see you again, Fëanáro."

Over tea, Sören started off by confirming he was a reincarnated Fëanor, much as Nicholas was a reincarnated Fingolfin.

"By rights, this is yours," Maglor said, trying to give back the Silmaril. "You made it -"

Now was the time for the other part of the equation. Sören reached into his pocket, pulled out the pouch of Silmarils, and dumped them out on the coffee table. It was like someone had turned on a klieg light in the room, and rainbows spangled the walls and ceiling.

"Wait." Maglor put up both hands. "How do you have three Silmarils and then this -"

"I'm not from this world," Sören said.

Maglor's brow furrowed. Nicholas blinked.

Sören took out his cell phone again, accessed the gallery, and brought up a folder of photos of himself and his partners - his world's version of Dooku and Maglor - and his children. He passed the phone over. Then he pulled out the mini-portal. "Someone in my extended family accidentally went through a portal and went universe-hopping for awhile. He met another version of me, who told him how to get home, and he gave me a stone from that world. I got the idea to melt it down with a piece of a palantir, and tested it out."

"So you're not really backpacking around Europe," Nicholas said, his tone stern. "You're backpacking around the multiverse."

"I'm sorry to lie to you, but I'm sure you understand why I couldn't reveal the truth right away." Sören flipped the mini-portal around and around, then leaned back in his seat, the mini-portal resting on his thigh.

When Nicholas and Maglor had seen enough photos of "the fam" to be convinced Sören was telling the truth, Nicholas handed Sören back his phone. "You have a family where you come from, why are you here and not there?"

Sören sighed and pinched the bridge of his nose. This was the hardest part to explain. "I killed someone," Sören said. "In self-defense. I panicked and took off. I saw you guys..."

He used the Force to lift the mini-portal from his knee.

"How did you -"

That answered Sören's question about whether or not they were Force-sensitive here, if that was even a thing here. Sören shrugged. "Again, I come from another world and things are... different there." He floated the mini-portal back down. "Anyway, I came here, even though I had no idea where 'here' was. Those ravens you saw... they're Arafinwë's messenger birds." *Then Odin stole them.* "They know things."

"And you haven't gone back, even though you've been here... how long now, a few days?" Maglor cocked his head to one side.

Sören nodded. "I'm going to go back but I realized if I just took off without telling you anything and you encountered this world's version of me at some point and he didn't remember, it wasn't going to end well. So now you know to look for a Sören Sigurðsson here... and an Anthony Hewlett-Johnson, if he exists. That's Ara. That's the guy with black hair and green eyes you saw in my photo album."

"Not blond," Maglor said.

"He always wanted to be like us," Sören said.

"Pardon me for a moment, please," Nicholas said, getting up.

A few minutes later Sören heard Nicholas speaking in French down the hall, and from what he could make out of the conversation - Sören still couldn't believe he could speak French now, courtesy of the ravens - Nicholas was asking his sous chef to fill in for him today since he had a "family emergency". When Nicholas came back, he had a bottle of whiskey in one hand and a laptop in the other. It wasn't noon yet - it was barely morning - but nonetheless he poured shots for each of them and then opened up his laptop and began to type, scowling.

After he downed his shot, Maglor took the entire bottle and had a nip, which Sören almost found amusing, but mostly he just felt bad that this had broken their brains so much. "Can I ask what you're doing?" Sören asked Nicholas.

"I'm looking for you," Nicholas said, and then, "Er. This... this world's version of you."

Some more typing, a second shot of whiskey for Nicholas, and then he put his laptop down. "There are only a few hits and none of them tell me *where* you... he... can be found."

Sören wasn't surprised his counterpart was reluctant to divulge that information publicly. Sören wondered if his other self had the sort of checkered history with abusive partners that he'd had.

"Well..." Sören picked up the mini-portal. "I have an idea."

Sören sat out in the walled garden, alone - except for Huginn and Muninn, who came to join him. Sören took a few moments to compose himself, badly shaken from the conversation he'd just had, the *surreality* of his life, preparing himself for another shakeup. Somehow, seeing another version of himself was much more fraught than encountering other versions of his partners.

Sören didn't know what he expected to find, but it wasn't himself curled up in the fetal position on a soiled mattress with a thin, shabby blanket covering him, looking unkempt, sobbing.

"Oh god." Sören dropped the mini-portal into the grass and his hand covered his mouth. In a way, that seemed worse than finding out he was dead. "Oh god." He heard himself lapsing into Icelandic. "*Fíkniefni? Er það geðsjúkdómur?*" He knew from his party days in Reykjavik, nursing a broken heart, that he had a tendency to self-medicate, and he'd always struggled with depression and anxiety, so it made him wonder if it was worse here. Either of those possibilities - or both - terrified him.

He used the Force to pick the mini-portal back up, and watched himself shift position on the mattress, looking uncomfortable. That was when he noticed the collar around his neck, fitted with a heavy lock... and a dog lead, all around the room.

Muninn let out a *quork* and alighted on Sören's shoulder, and a series of images flashed in Sören's mind's eye - Big Ben, Buckingham Palace, the Thames... his old neighborhood in Greenwich. *He's in London*, Sören realized.

Then Huginn landed on Sören's head and began to peck at Sören's curls, and for an instant Sören was *there*, inside his counterpart's body, inside his counterpart's mind. Being held captive in a small bedroom, kept on a dog lead, only allowed occasional hygiene, occasional food - just enough to keep him alive. In isolation constantly, no books or TV or Internet, no visitors, nothing to get him out of his head.

The face of Justin Roberts, grinning evilly as he beat him. As he forced himself on him, the burning pain, intensified as his body locked up in fear...

...Justin spitting in his face, laughing before he slapped it again. "Bitch," Justin scoffed.

Sören was snapped back to his own body, his own mind. Now he was in fight-or-flight mode, remembering his relationship with Justin Roberts and how he'd been abused, raped. This - what his counterpart was enduring - was worse.

With a chill, Sören realized it was what would have happened if he didn't get out when he did.

Sören got up, shaking like a leaf, feeling sick to his stomach, almost falling over from the dizzy shock of living it. He made his way back into the house, where Maglor and Nicholas watched him with alarm.

"London," Sören croaked out. "He's in London, and it's not good."

"When you say not good -" Nicholas pursed his lips.

"He's being abused by my ex and he... he might end up dying," Sören said.

"Right." Nicholas and Maglor looked at each other, nodded, and got up. "I'll get the car ready for a trip across the Channel -"

Sören laughed, even though none of it was funny. "We don't need to take a car," Sören said. He let the mini-portal hover in the air, spinning just above his fingertip.

Chapter 18

They needed to have a plan for everything to work, so Sören kept checking the mini-portal to see when Justin would return to his flat, where he was keeping this world's Sören prisoner in the spare bedroom. The minute Sören saw Justin getting out of his garish red-and-yellow McLaren and walking towards the five-story brick building, Sören sprang up, gestured for Nicholas and Maglor to follow, and led them to the backyard.

They portaled directly into the apartment, before Justin got in. Sören took a look around and made a noise of disgust - the entire place was filthy, Justin needed a housekeeper - and then he led the charge to the back room. He could hear his counterpart making muffled sobs and it went right to his heart... and his gut, feeling a surge of nausea as he recalled his brief jaunt into his counterpart's mind while Justin was abusing him... reliving his own abuse at Justin's hands years ago.

Sören's Maglor had killed Justin Roberts after he'd found out. Sören had been a very different person then in the days before the Balrog ambush, wary of committing murder himself, even though he'd done it once, to keep his uncle Einar from killing his sister. Now... something awakened in Sören, like the mental equivalent of shifting into a werewolf, all hunger, no remorse. Justin Roberts was going to die today, for what he'd done.

First, they needed to free his counterpart. Sören almost retched at the overpowering ammonia smell as he used the Force to open the locked door, but it wasn't his other self's fault. His other self looked up at them with terror in his eyes and crawled back.

"I really have gone mad," he said.

Sören's response to that was to push as hard as he could with the Force, breaking the chains. His counterpart screamed, and then he fell apart, sobbing with what Sören knew was a mixture of relief and fear.

"Who... who are you?" his counterpart asked.

"Someone who's here to help," Sören said, and then he turned to Nicholas and Maglor who, he knew, were trying to be very polite about the smell, not wanting him to feel worse than he already did. "We're going to take you someplace safe. Someplace where Justin can't hurt you anymore."

Maglor held out his arms. "It's all right."

His counterpart was afraid - rightly so, Sören thought, after all he'd been through he was probably concerned he was getting into an even worse situation - but then Maglor gently picked him up off the bed. Sören cringed as he saw how gaunt his counterpart was, alarmingly thin, very likely malnourished. "Jesus," Sören said under his breath, not able to help the reaction, utterly appalled at what Justin had done.

He was going to make it *hurt*.

"I'm sorry," the other-Sören cried, knowing how filthy he was and how terrible to look at.

"Shhhhh," Maglor soothed, holding him tighter. "We'll get you all washed up and fed soon, ok?"

They came out of the bedroom just in time for Justin to walk into the flat. He dropped his keys on the floor. "What's all this, then?"

Those were the last words this world's Justin Roberts ever spoke.

Sören waved his hand and Force-threw Justin six feet, crashing into the wall, then with every ember of fury fanned into a nuclear explosion - the vision of burning ships at the back of his mind - he waved his hand again and watched as Justin flew up from the floor three feet into the air, held immobile. Justin opened his mouth and before he could scream, Sören clenched his fist and Justin began to choke. Sören's fist shook as he kept Justin choking, choking, choking the same way he'd Force-choked Einar to death when he was in his twenties.

"*Ég er andi elds,*" Sören said, looking into Justin's blue eyes as he watched the terror, wanting Justin to be as afraid as he'd made his counterpart. He knew choking to death was a horrible panic, and it still felt too good for Justin but anything more elaborate would potentially bring the police and problems for his other-self, who had suffered enough. Sören nodded and smiled like a predatory wolf as he continued his litany. "*Ef þú hefðir ekki drýgt svona alvarlegar syndir, þá hefði alheimurinn ekki sent mig til að refsa þé.*"

Justin made a rattling sound and then he began to turn blue. Sören waited, continuing to choke with the Force until Justin's body violently eliminated and he was gone. Sören let Justin's body hit the floor.

Sören turned to his counterpart, watching with his mouth open. "Does anyone else know you live here?" Sören asked; that would determine what was done with the body.

Other-Sören shook his head. "People think I'm dead, probably."

"You have nothing personally identifying here?" Sören asked. "No ID, bank cards..."

Other-Sören shook his head again. "He got rid of all that stuff."

That meant he could probably leave the body here and people would just think Justin overdosed on drugs - Sören could see paraphernalia on the coffee table.

Before he left, Sören decided he was going to take a parting gift. Using the Force only - being careful not to touch anything and leave fingerprints - Sören opened Justin's pockets and took out his wallet and his cell phone. He felt filthy even handling the items as he slipped them into his own pocket, but there was a method to his madness.

They used the mini-portal and landed in the back garden of Nicholas and Maglor's home in Étretat. Maglor carried other-Sören inside, and Sören followed Nicholas inside to retrieve his backpack.

"You're leaving," Nicholas said matter-of-factly, with a disapproving little frown.

"My work here is done. I have a home, a family to get back to, and the longer I'm here, the worse it's going to be for me when I return," Sören said.

"You won't even stay to -"

"And the longer I'm here, the harder it's going to be for me to leave," Sören said. He swallowed hard and held back tears, then he took a few steps forward and kissed

Nicholas's forehead. He put his hands on Nicholas's shoulders. "I love you. Every version of you, probably. But this isn't my world. It's his. And with time, and trust... you guys will find your way."

"I hope so." Nicholas touched Sören's face. "*Mon Dieu*, what that savage did to him. I hope you didn't endure the same -"

"Not quite the same, but enough." Sören nodded. "It's not going to be easy for him to heal -"

"We will be patient," Nicholas said.

"I have faith," Sören said, and took Nicholas's hand and put it on his heart. He kissed it, and stepped back just as he heard water running, for his other-self's bath. "Take care of him, and each other. Find Anthony, when he's ready."

Sören walked away, and kept walking, not looking back. He did need to go home, but he needed a little more time first. He needed to take care of business. When he was on a country road, nowhere else around, he took a rest stop and a peek at the mini-portal. "Take me back to London, and where I can go without being spotted."

Once Sören had portaled back to London, into an alley, he glamourised himself to look like Justin Roberts, and walked up to the nearest bank and made a withdrawal from an ATM with Justin's bank card, everything Justin had in his account that he could take. He cackled as the cash spat out into the tray.

Sören went back to the London alley where he'd portaled in, dropped the glamour, and from there he portaled into this world's Paris. He threw Justin's phone into the Seine, then checked into the Ritz with Justin's money, despite his usual aversion to swanky, ostentatious displays of wealth, and the very first thing he did in his penthouse suite was take a very long, very hot shower, feeling like he needed to get the stink of that tiny back room off himself.

To wash Justin off himself, even though it had been sixteen years since the last time his world's Justin had touched him. All the reminders brought it back like it had been yesterday.

I will never be completely free, no matter how many years pass, Sören thought bitterly as he scrubbed himself with rose-scented soap.

Sören had a hard time getting to sleep that night - which he chalked up partly to the horror of what had happened to his counterpart, which he could not unsee or unsmell, and partly to the adrenaline crash of the raid on Justin's flat, partly to the realization that he had killed in cold blood and didn't feel one whit of guilt about it... and partly to the apprehension about going home in the morning, knowing that his absence had complicated things.

Eventually he did get to sleep, and then he was woken up by nightmares, reliving the verbal and physical abuse from Justin, the rapes.

He went out to the terrace of his penthouse suite, overlooking the panorama of Paris at night. He'd been here before, with his Maglor, what felt like ages ago. It was different now to be here alone. And he had been so young in those days, still in his twenties. He was older now.

Old and tired.

Not so tired that his brain wasn't nagging him about Justin. Sören stroked his beard as he leaned on the railing, deep in thought. It seemed like Sören, Maglor, Nicholas/Dooku and Anthony were fated to find each other across the multiverse, even if they needed a little intervention like the kind Sören had given today.

It didn't make sense to why he was abused by Justin in other universes, as they didn't have that same sort of bond, so it seemed. Yes, he was sure there was a Justin Roberts on other versions of Earth the way there were other versions of him, of Nicholas/Dooku, of Maglor, of Anthony. But it made sense that the Finwioni and Maglor would cross paths. It didn't make sense that out of ten billion people on the planet, Sören would keep crossing paths with Justin Roberts. Unless...

A chill went through Sören, a sick feeling rising in the pit of his stomach. He had a feeling where this was going, and he didn't like it.

Suddenly Huginn and Muninn swooped down from where they'd been roosting on the roof of the Ritz, as if they'd been summoned. Muninn sat on Sören's head and suddenly Sören felt like he was being jolted across the ages, back into Fëanor's body, Fëanor's mind. He was reliving the Balrog ambush, whipped, burned, mortally wounded, in agony, yet still fighting back with every last ounce of his strength.

There were two Balrogs with long, flaming red hair. One of them Sören recognized as Loki...

...and one of them was a woman who looked very much like Loki, but also looked... familiar. Piercing grey eyes like Fëanor's own, skin kissed with freckles in the days before the Sun. Shrieking with laughter.

"You," he breathed.

All of the years of insults and mockery and neglect, draining him, pushing him deeper and deeper into his forge, escaping through his art... he realized now she never loved him, she had been against him all along, the first betrayal in a series of too many. He felt like a fool for not seeing it, for thinking that he was the problem.

Nerdanel threw back her head and laughed. "Do you want me to put out the fire, Fëanáro? Is it hurting you?" Nerdanel spat in his face. And laughed some more, her laughter horrible, shrieking.

Nerdanel raised her hand and a whip of flame appeared, like those of the Balrogs. She took Balrog form herself now, all fire, all power, all despair. She lashed him severely, and then the leader, Gothmog, lashed him so hard he toppled. Nerdanel loomed over him, laughing and laughing.

Fëanor was raving when his sons bore him away. He tried to warn them. "Your mother," he said over and over again, but could not get the words out.

Sören remembered the words of Loki, sitting right in his own living room back in Akureyri

in 2020.

"Like Ingwion, I used to be an Elf," Loki said. "I am Nerdanel's twin brother. I was... rowdy... and sent away at a young age to be fostered."

Sören's jaw dropped – he felt like an idiot for not realizing it sooner, with the long red hair, but then, a lot of people had red hair.

"You're my uncle?" Maglor's eyes widened.

"Yes."

"You still did not answer the nature of your illness," Dooku said. "And as you know, Elves are not very susceptible to illness. Not impervious, but it is not common."

"No," Loki said. "I was captured by Melkor and I was... experimented on. I was changed."

"Into an Orc?" Maglor looked ready to throttle him again.

"Worse." Loki exhaled sharply. "I was turned into a Balrog. I was not myself. During that time when I was not myself, I was one of the Balrogs responsible for Fëanor's death, assisting Gothmog -"

Of course, "Ingwion" aka Freyr and Loki had both lied to him about things, which called the entire veracity of their testimony into question. But Sören was sure Loki had not lied to him about being a Balrog. What he'd lied about - one of many lies - was that he had been changed. Sören knew now, as Huginn flew off his head and landed on the railing of the terrace with a *quork*, that Loki and Nerdanel had always been Balrogs.

Nerdanel had been assigned by Morgoth to abuse him. To demoralize him. To set him on the path that would ultimately lead to his destruction.

Sören already had a pretty good idea now, after seeing the vision of Nerdanel in Balrog form, helping to kill him, what all this meant. But if there was any doubt left in his mind, Huginn flew from the railing to Sören's right shoulder and nipped at his earlobe, making Sören yelp before he got hit with another mental "download".

He saw Nerdanel killed and reborn, her fëa remade by Sauron to follow Fëanor-as-Sören into Middle-Earth. He saw something like a large seed of light split in half, a hall of infinite mirrors. In half the mirrors was the image of Justin Roberts, with his fake tan, his blond fauxhawk, his blue eyes and smug face, athletic build. In half the mirrors was a woman with long chestnut brown hair that she dyed black, dressed in all black, wearing a silver pentagram and dramatic black lipstick and eye makeup.

"Juniper," Huginn croaked.

He saw himself with Justin, with Juniper, across worlds - not in all of them, but enough. Justin verbally abusing him, cheating on him, sometimes getting as far as beating and raping him. Juniper verbally abusing him, cheating on him, neglecting him. In one world, throwing a huge tantrum where she destroyed Sören's art and stuffed animals. In another world, putting him in a car accident, necessitating walking with a cane for the rest of his life.

Sören's heart hammered in his ears, getting angrier and angrier at what he was seeing - and that sharp feeling of betrayal, the sickening feeling that he'd been played by an agent

of Morgoth too many times, too many worlds - but then he saw something even worse.

In one world he saw Justin visiting Iceland for a football match, flirting with Margrét in a bar in Reykjavik. Raping and stabbing her to death, the mystery unsolved. The trauma of it contributing to why Sören moved to London, in that world.

In another world he saw Anthony, doing bumps of cocaine, with Justin as his supplier. Justin insulting him, hitting him. Forcing himself on Anthony, dry, rough, making Anthony bleed and break down crying, turning to opiates - something stronger - to cope with the trauma.

That filth. Justin Fucking Roberts. Sören spat. He felt like something snapped in his mind. Huginn flew off his shoulder to join Muninn on the railing, and Sören began to speak aloud to the ravens. "I'm going to find him somewhere and kill him. Never mind what he did to me, I mean that's bad enough but that was... dealt with. And back when I couldn't deal with it myself. Before I became this." Sören gestured to himself and sneered. "The Fenrir-wolf, unchained."

Huginn nodded and replied in his deep croak. "Justin Roberts deserves to die, for what he did."

"Jæja. And I'd, you know, kill him once, or twice, for my sister. But then. But then." Sören took a deep breath. The wind began to stir. "He hurt Arafinwë."

The ravens hissed like angry cats.

"*He. Hurt. Arafinwë.*" Sören began pacing around, energy seeming to spark off him. **He. Hurt. Arafinwë. He raped my Arafinwë.** My Arafinwë. My Finarfin. **Mine.** Another world's Arafinwë, but mine all the same. They are all mine, in every universe, everywhere."

Sören clenched his fists. Dark storm clouds began to roll in the night sky, the sharp ozone tang of petrichor in the air, a spring storm. "**He hurt Arafinwë. He hurt Arafinwë. He hurt Arafinwë, he raped Arafinwë, HE HURT ARA, HE HURT WHAT IS MINE. MY OWN. MY BLOOD.** My brother. My lover. My husband. The father of two of my children." Sören meant the ravens, who he gave a brief smile - then he stopped smiling, feeling himself scowl. Deadly serious. Just deadly. "And for THAT? Justin Roberts is going to pay as many times as I can make him pay. I will hunt him down. He touched my Finarfin, *he is not fit to breathe the same air as him*, and he touched him, hurt him..."

"Nevermore," Muninn rasped.

"I won't come after Juniper. I don't hit women," Sören said. "But Justin... He was only going to die a few times, for what he did to me, what he did to Margrét... but after seeing what I just saw... he's going to die a lot, now. He is going to suffer first. It will not be an easy death for him."

He would be gone at least a few more days, a few more weeks... but he had to do it. He had seen this for a reason. He was the hand of fate, intervening for all his selves, all his loves.

His beloved Arafinwë most of all, who had inspired the Silmarils, the light even the gods coveted. He hoped that in the deepest darkness of his wrath, meting out justice would spark Arafinwë's light back to life.

"So it begins," Sören said, and went back into the suite, preparing to check out of the Ritz

and go hunting across the multiverse.

In another world, another version of Justin Roberts woke up in a warehouse, strapped down on a table like those used in medical examinations. Not naked, but wearing loose-fitting orange pants like prisoners do. Sören wanted him to have the added humiliation of soiling his clothes before it was all over, remembering the filth his counterpart had been forced to endure.

"What... what's going on?" Justin looked at Sören, eyes wide with fear. "Who are you? Where am I?"

Sören spat in his face. "Welcome to Hell, Justin Roberts. And me? I'm the Flame Imperishable. Get ready to burn, motherfucker."

With that, Sören covered Justin's face with a cloth and used the Force to begin dumping water on Justin's head. Justin thrashed about, screaming, choking.

Sören repeated the waterboarding process several times. Justin started to break - soiling himself far sooner than Sören anticipated - and Justin sobbed, pleading with Sören for his life.

"Why... why is this happening?"

Of course this version of Justin was as vile as the others. The ravens had shown him. He hadn't yet come near Sören's family in this world - though that would have only been a matter of time - but Justin had done unspeakable things to people, including and especially trafficked, underage sex workers. "I think you know why. You have quite a history, Justin." Sören gave him a predatory smile. *You hurt my sunrise, my light, you violated the breath of spring of my life, somewhere, and now winter is coming for you, orc.* He kept these words to himself, they hurt too much to speak aloud.

"His-history... no, I don't know." Justin was lying.

"History! You know, things done in the past." Sören folded his arms. "Hey, speaking of things in the past, you ever learn any Viking history?"

"Er... maybe?"

"Do the words *blood eagle* mean anything to you?"

"Uh... no."

"Well... they will." Sören looked over at the knives waiting in the corner of the room, when he would get bored of waterboarding Justin. Which wouldn't be for awhile. "They sure will." Sören slapped him on the shoulder, before he slapped Justin in the face, and grabbed the cloth again.

Chapter 19

In one world, the one where Justin had raped and murdered Margrét, Sören arrived in London just in time to see Justin running a light with his McLaren, under the influence - wearing a Ring of Power purchased from an antique shop run by Sauron, unwittingly "programmed" - crashing his car into Anthony's Audi. From the sidewalk, glamoured, wearing a hoodie to obscure his face just in case the glamour fell during high emotion, Sören used the Force to make sure Justin died in the crash and Anthony was spared, throwing out something like an energy bubble wrap around Anthony at the last second.

Then he went back to the alley he came from, and threw up in a dumpster, shaking. Hoping that Anthony wasn't too severely injured. Weeping.

In some worlds, Sören was too late to kill Justin. In one world Dooku and Maglor killed Justin together. In one world Justin had raped a young woman named Karen, who a couple versions of Sören loved, and Karen had killed Justin in self-defense. Sören was glad Karen had killed him - though it broke his heart to know she had suffered first...

...but missing out on the opportunity to kill Justin just made Sören thirstier for his blood, his pain, wanting to make the deaths he was capable of *really* count.

In one world, Sören threw Justin down a long-since-forgotten well and blocked the opening, so he'd take a few hours to suffocate.

In one world, Sören glamoured himself, hot-wired a car, and drove it through a portal to run over Justin before he could go on a first date with that world's version of Sören, driving the car through another portal before abandoning it.

In another world, Sören glamoured himself, grabbed Justin, and portaled him to Cumbria in northern England, using the Force to lift Justin all the way to the top of a 290-foot tall smokestack, Justin dangling by the seat of his pants, watching in the shadows as Justin died of fear.

In another world, Sören got some supplies ready, glamoured himself, grabbed Justin, and portaled him to a deserted island in the Indian Ocean, holding Justin immobile with the Force as he built an upside-down cross, then he crucified Justin and left him there to die slowly, alone, in the middle of nowhere, as he took off for the next world.

In that world, Sören got another set of supplies ready, glamoured himself, grabbed Justin, and portaled him to another deserted island, where Justin watched helplessly, body Force-locked as Sören raised a pole, then bound Justin to it and used the Force to set him on fire. Sören roasted marshmallows and sang "Kumbaya" as Justin burned alive, screaming.

After the burning, Sören wondered if he was going a little too far, and then he thought of the vision of Margrét being raped and stabbed to death... Anthony being raped, bleeding, broken, turning to opiates in his trauma. It made Sören rage all over again, the sickening adrenaline rush.

Then he thought of Juniper, who he wouldn't touch because he didn't hit women, yet probably was doing gods-knew-what in the worlds where she existed. In his mind's eye, Sören saw Juniper attempting to cast a spell to hurt him. Sören remembered what it was like to feel himself die in another world's Dagor Dagorath back in 2020 and he hoped that

at the very least, Juniper was feeling other versions of Justin dying across the multiverse.

Ég er andi elds. Ég er eldurinn sem hreinsar.

Sören thought of the Balrog ambush in 2021 - how Loki had been spying on them - and then of the Balrog ambush of old, Feanor mortally wounded at the hands of Loki and Nerdanel. He thought of that betrayal, the sheer amount of evil it took to pretend to love someone for years just to victimize them.

Once again he thought of Anthony bleeding, drugging himself to escape the terror. His fists clenched, his teeth grit, rage seething through him.

The problem wasn't that he'd gone too far... it was that he hadn't gone far enough. And Sören knew if he didn't get that impulse in check, he was going to be away from his home longer and longer and that was risky considering that he didn't have any kind of mathematical formula for time elapsing in his world, against the others. There seemed to be an infinite number of universes, even if Justin only existed in a fraction of them, he couldn't possibly kill every version of Justin Roberts... and if he went by the "heads of a hydra" theory he had cut off enough proverbial heads now to make a difference. Maybe other versions of himself could take care of the rest.

Sören needed to make himself stop, but he needed just one more. He needed to visit the world where Justin had raped Anthony, and if Justin was still alive, exact his final vengeance by any means necessary.

Sören paid £5 to use the public shower at King's Cross and get himself cleaned up, then he went to a pub, needing a stiff drink to mentally cleanse the carnage, and prepare himself for the last act of his epic revenge saga. He didn't like the fact that he'd been turning to alcohol to cope - he had sworn to never be like his aunt and uncle - but everything was too much, and it kept his most destructive impulses in check. As he sat in the pub, he played with the mini-portal like it was a fidget spinner, and at last he gazed into it. *Show me that version of Anthony*, he spoke to the mini-portal through the Force. *You know the one.*

Of course, it was one thing to see him, a wreck shaking under blankets, and it was another thing to know *where* he was. Sören could portal directly to him, but he didn't like doing something like that without context of where he was going.

As if on cue, the song in the background changed to "Englishman In New York" by Sting. "Ah," Sören said under his breath. He had encountered an Anthony in the States during the trip where he'd been too late to kill one of the Justins - that was where a Karen Swanson had done it - but he'd made sure to offer immortality to that world's Sören, Dooku and Anthony before he checked out. He wished in hindsight he'd given some of his blood to the Nicholas in Étretat but...

They'll find a way somehow.

It made sense that at least in some worlds, Anthony would end up in the States. Sören wasn't particularly keen on going to that trash fire of a country, again, but he'd do it for Anthony. First, though, he had to deal with that world's Justin.

Justin, as it turned out, had been convicted for attempted murder - of Anthony - and was sitting in an English prison cell.

"All righty then," Sören said, and knocked back a shot of whiskey. This was going to be

his grand finale, and he knew just the thing.

Sören portaled directly into Justin's prison cell - glamoured as Justin himself. The ravens flew through the bars to distract the guards and turn off the security camera. Before Justin could scream, Sören covered his mouth and locked Justin's body with the Force.

Then Justin watched as Sören glamoured himself into a writhing mass of tentacles and eyes and mouths, like something out of an HR Giger fever dream. Every tentacle dripped with black slime, and they reached out for Justin one by one.

The tentacles contracted around Justin Roberts and squeezed. Choking, crushing. Every time Justin got close to death from asphyxiation, the tentacles released, letting him catch his breath... then they started again. The mouths bit off Justin's fingers one at a time, then his toes, spitting them out into Justin's face, making him watch. The tentacles slapped him in the face, went up his nose, in his ears, and Justin couldn't scream because he was choking, hyperventilating. Over and over Sören brought Justin to the brink, showed "mercy", and it started back up, torturing him, terrorizing him - Sören could feel the raw, primal fear - until Justin's heart finally gave out, his body shitting and pissing and dying.

The ravens came back, and still glamoured, Sören took off through the portal.

The next stop was to where his counterpart in that world was sleeping on the street, hair and beard grown out. Unglamoured, the ravens perched on his shoulders, Sören kicked his other self awake and tried not to laugh when his other self yelped.

"Oh god." Sören's counterpart looked around, eyes wild, and backed against the wall. He began babbling in Icelandic.

"Come with me if you want to live," Sören said, holding out his hand.

With the money he'd taken from Justin's bank accounts across the multiverse, Sören took his counterpart to a rehab facility in Connecticut and glamoured himself to check his other self in. From what he'd learned via the ravens, his counterpart had been another of Justin's victims - though his path hadn't yet crossed with Anthony's - and had ended up on heroin. Sören knew his counterpart had a long, hard road ahead of him, but he hoped the downright supernatural nature of his rescue and intervention would make his recovery stick.

After his counterpart was safely off to a room, a bath, and a meal at the rehab clinic, Sören walked for a mile out to the woods, then portaled into an alley in New York City. In the alley there was graffiti: BANGO SKANK WAS HERE. On his way out of the alley, he passed through a parking lot with a most curious sight - a single red rose growing from concrete, a brilliant, vibrant red like it was actually thriving, not merely surviving. Sören felt compelled to walk towards the rose, a frisson through him, hair standing on end, skin gooseflesh. He stooped down to smell the rose and gasped as he saw something like a sun in the center of the rose. Looking into the sun, in his mind's eye he suddenly saw a tall, black tower in a field of what seemed like a million, billion roses, as many roses as there were universes.

The sun in the center of the rose seemed to spark like the Flame Imperishable. Sören smiled at it and blew it a kiss before he got up and continued on his way.

Sören decided to do this the civilized way first. He used a mind trick to get the guard of Anthony's locked apartment complex to let him in, and once he was at the right door he knocked.

He knocked a few times, until he heard a familiar voice shout out, "Go away."

Sören took a deep breath. Neither of them were going to like what was about to happen.

Huginn shut off the security camera again and then Sören portaled directly into Anthony's studio apartment. While Sören didn't judge the poor - having been that way for some of his adult life - it nonetheless made him sad to see how far Anthony had fallen, laying on a couch folded out into a bed in a tiny, spartan apartment.

Anthony sat up and pulled the blankets down. He was too thin - not as thin as Sören's counterpart held captive by Justin had been, but still concerning - and he looked like hell, stubbly, dark circles under his bloodshot eyes, hair mussed; he needed a haircut. With shaking hands, Anthony reached for a large book on his endtable that turned out to be hollow and had a Glock pistol inside. Anthony turned off the safety and aimed.

Sören waved his hand and the gun flew out of Anthony's hands and into his own. Sören gently put the safety back on and threw the gun down on the floor. Then he walked over and sat on the edge of Anthony's bed. Anthony backed up the same way other-Sören had, utterly terrified.

"Jesus Christ," Anthony said, "I knew sometimes people hallucinate when they're in withdrawal but -"

"This isn't a hallucination," Sören said, and reached out his hand. "I'm not here to hurt you. Go on, see that I'm real."

Anthony warily put out his hand and grabbed Sören's. Then he lunged to attack what he still thought was an intruder. In Anthony's weakened state, he was easy to overpower. Sören pinned him and tsked. "Look," Sören said. "You can take my claim at face value or we can keep wrestling and you're already exhausted."

"Who are you?" Anthony narrowed his eyes. "Who sent you?"

Sören took out his cell phone, pulled up the gallery of photos of his family, and handed it to Anthony. "Dial 911 and I'll grab the gun and shoot you," Sören threatened.

But when Anthony saw himself with Sören, he was too stunned to do that, or even make words. His eyes wide, his mouth open, he went through the gallery. "You either have the best photoshop skills known to man, or -"

"I'm from a parallel universe, and I just used quantum technology to break into your flat," Sören said. "I have technology that enables me to see what people I love are doing in

other worlds and I had to help you." Sören cocked his head to one side. "How long have you been in withdrawal?"

"Three days," Anthony said. "Three days of hell." He handed the phone back to Sören and pinched the bridge of his nose. "I really must be hallucinating."

"You're not." Sören reached out and pulled Anthony into a hug. He knew it was the first time Anthony had been hugged in too long.

At first Anthony tensed - Sören knew physical contact was tough for him, after what happened with Justin - but after a moment it broke the dam and Anthony fell apart, weeping on Sören's shoulder. Sören began rocking him, petting him. "It's going to be all right," Sören whispered, stroking Anthony's hair, rubbing his back... shedding his own silent tears, wishing he could turn back time and *fix this*, somehow. "It's going to be OK."

Sören thought about bringing Anthony to the rehab clinic in Connecticut where he'd just checked in his counterpart, but it was evening. They'd go in the morning. That meant Sören had to get Anthony through the night.

The next fourteen hours felt like fourteen years. Anthony had dry heaves, and then actual vomiting. He kept running to the bathroom and twice, didn't make it. Sören helped him get cleaned up, and Anthony broke down again in shame. Anthony couldn't sleep, alternating between chills and sweating, feeling so restless he had to get up and pace, then so exhausted from just pacing around that he flopped down, crying again.

Sören made sure to keep him hydrated, and mostly, he held Anthony as much as he wanted to be held. When Anthony's muscle aches and abdominal cramps got particularly bad and Anthony wailed like a wounded banshee, Sören found himself pushing with the Force as hard as he could, to try to ease his pain. It worked, and Anthony rested - not able to sleep, but in some measure of relief - and Sören rocked him, sang to him.

In the morning, Sören had Anthony pack everything he could take, "because you're not coming back here," and then they portaled together to the woods in Connecticut. Anthony was too withdrawal-addled to make the mile walk to the clinic, so Sören picked him up, pulling on strength in the Force, and carried him.

When they got closer to the clinic but not yet there, the ravens swooped down and Sören had them "talk" to Anthony via mental images, to try to explain to him what was about to happen - his path would cross with Sören's counterpart here, and they both knew they'd received help from another version of Sören but it was probably better not to discuss that with others.

Just before it came time to glamour himself, Sören gave Anthony a hug. He wanted to kiss Anthony, even with Anthony looking like a wreck and having shat himself and vomited in front of him - such was love. But he knew that kiss belonged to his counterpart... and it would take time for Anthony to feel safe enough to get there. Sören's counterpart, too.

Once Anthony was checked into the rehab clinic - Sören used the bug-out money to do it - he made his way along the road, and halfway to the woods he sat down on the side of the road and just wept, his heart breaking over and over again. As satisfying as it had been to kill Justin many times over, it didn't undo what had been done to Anthony. The memories that Anthony had to live with for the rest of his life.

It was a cold victory, and it felt like there was no justice at all in the multiverse.

And now, he had to go home to his Anthony, and hope that he would be forgiven for however long it was that he'd been gone.

For the monster he'd become.

In the woods, Sören grabbed onto the troll cross necklace. "Take me home," he told the portal.

He arrived under the endless blue sky, the sheep bleating, Huan running right up to him, tongue lolling.

Ali and Maglor came out of the house - Sören knew they'd felt him portal in - and Dooku and Anthony followed. Maglor strode, Dooku and Anthony approached more slowly, warily.

Ali ran, and Sören held out his arms. Instead of hugging him, Ali punched him in the face, hard enough to drop him.

"Fucker," Ali snarled.

Sören held his stinging face. He was afraid to ask - that reaction could only mean one thing - but he did. "What... what year is it."

"2034," Dooku said coldly. "You've been gone two years."

Anthony glared, then looked away and closed his eyes.

Sören sat up and Ali kicked him. "We thought you were dead," Ali yelled. "You *bastard*."

Sören closed his eyes. *I almost wish I were, right now.*

Chapter 20

October 2034

Sören woke up to a kiss on the tip of his nose, and the sight of Anthony's moss-green eyes. Sören smiled - he would never take that love for granted, especially not now.

They were naked in each other's arms, their legs entwined. They'd taken a nap after an intense Krav Maga sparring session that led to an early-afternoon romp. Anthony had fucked Sören from behind, fast and furious, then for their second round Sören lay on his back and they made love slowly, sweetly, looking into each other's eyes, lots of kissing and little touches. It was a beautiful - and very hot - memory, one Sören would always cherish. But even more than the delicious orgasmic release, Sören liked snuggling close to him, skin to skin, the two of them safe with each other, their shelter from the crazy world.

An entire crazy multiverse. Even now, three months after his return, some things could not be unseen; Sören would forever be haunted by Anthony's counterpart in opiate withdrawal and he hoped sincerely that wherever he was now, he and that world's Sören had found a similar peace together.

The peace of this afternoon had been hard-won.

The entire family had been upset with Sören for taking off as he did and staying away so long - Sören had no idea that what felt like a few weeks hopping across the multiverse would amount to two years where he came from - and it had taken some time for things to simmer down. Maglor was the first to forgive him, within a matter of days - the Eldar sense of time was much different than a newly-immortal human's, and Maglor understood Fëanor well enough to know Fëanor did only what Fëanor could do, had to do. Darren also got it, saying he would probably do similar in that situation. Anthony and Ali had been next several weeks later; Ali grudgingly admitted she too would do the same thing, and was sort of proud of Sören for the Justin Roberts massacre, while Anthony's heart softened at knowing how Sören had cared for his opiate-withdrawal-suffering counterpart. Sören was still working on repairing bonds with Kate, Tori and Junior - especially after the way Kate and Tori had lost their biological father and Junior had lost his mother, they all had very real fears of losing Sören again...

...and then there was Dooku. That relationship looked to be well and truly over, and they'd spent the better part of three months avoiding or mostly ignoring each other; Sören had moved into the forge to give Dooku a wide berth. Sören still held out a torch of hope that with more time and rebuilding trust, they would eventually reconcile, but that flame was growing more dim by the day, and the ache of missing him was sharper and sharper, intensified by the ancient grief Fëanor carried of the rift with Fingolfin before they died.

As Sören yawned and stretched, a fresh wave of grief came over him. It finally hit him that today was October ninth... fourteen years since the Dagor Dagorath in another universe, thirteen years since the Balrog ambush.

"*Jesus*," Sören growled, sitting up.

Anthony put a hand on Sören's knee. "What is it, love?"

"The date today." Sören pursed his lips.

Anthony facepalmed, realizing. "Oh fuck."

"Yeah." Sören flopped back down. "Can we just stay in bed all day and cuddle? Make the day go away?"

"No," Anthony said, and gently pulled Sören back up. He let out a deep sigh, his brow furrowed. "I really hate to do this to you, but I have a meeting on Zoom starting in an hour. My phone was going to go off in a few minutes and I woke up before the alarm and decided better to wake you up this way, I know how you love alarms." Anthony stuck his tongue out, then he gave Sören gentle pats. "I'm sorry."

"Yeah, me too." Sören scowled.

After they got dressed, Sören followed Anthony into the main house. They stopped and said hello to Medika, who was in her herb room, tending the various plants - Medika gave the best hugs, and ever since Sören's return she'd hugged him a little tighter, which he found he needed. Then they went to the kitchen, where Anthony grabbed a bottle of sparkling water to prepare for his Zoom meeting, and Sören himself was thirsty enough to brave walking past Dooku, busy at work cooking the evening meal, for the same.

Then Dooku glanced from his countertop of ingredients, over at the pot simmering on the stove, and he glared like the pot had done something personally to offend him. "Damn it," he grumbled.

Sören huffed. He was getting really tired of this. "I'll be out of your hair in a sec, Nico," he muttered, uncapping his water and taking a big swig.

"No, I'm out of garlic." Dooku folded his arms. "Completely out, and the recipe calls for it. It's too late to do something else now. I'm going to have to make a run to town to go to the store." He looked over at Anthony.

Anthony gave a nervous little laugh. "I have a Zoom meeting starting shortly. I have to attend."

"I still can't believe MI6 does business on Zoom," Sören blurted out, even though he tried to talk as little as possible in front of Dooku.

"Well, not anything confidential," Anthony said. "The method to our madness is if anyone is looking in, they get a lot of boring shit to have fun with."

That answer seemed a little too glib.

"You... have a meeting," Dooku said, his tone flat.

"Yyyyyep." Anthony took a big swig of his water, his eyes locked with Dooku's.

"Oh god," Sören said, facepalming, as his brain made the connection.

Since his return, there had been a rule imposed upon Sören - he either needed to surrender the mini-portal to one of the adults in the household, or if he wouldn't surrender the mini-portal, and he did not, he was never allowed to be left "unsupervised": if it was just Darren and Medika at the farm, Darren had a large amount of space to cover with the sheep, and Medika was an old woman and didn't want to have to fight Sören to keep him from jaunting off again, so he had to be with one of the other adults. Ali and Maglor were

picking up the kids at school and taking them out for a bit, Sören wasn't going to be allowed to sit in the same room while Anthony had his MI6 meeting, so that meant he was going to have to accompany Dooku into town.

Dooku's sour expression got more sour. "There's no way you can cancel?" Dooku asked.

"Nope." Anthony gave an apologetic little frown. "Sorry."

"Not as bloody sorry as I am," Dooku said under his breath. He took off his apron and tossed it onto the counter instead of his usual habit of neatly folding it. He took a few steps and when he saw Sören wasn't following behind, he gave Sören a withering look over his shoulder. "Well?"

Sören gave Anthony the side-eye on the way out. Dooku was usually pretty good about keeping track of supplies, it was unlike him to be suddenly out of ingredients, and Sören hadn't heard anything about this Zoom meeting before today. He wondered if there even was a Zoom meeting, and if Anthony had perhaps pilfered the garlic. Anthony blinked innocently before looking away as he took a big sip of sparkling water, then gave Sören a little nudge with the Force, shoving him along to a closer pace behind Dooku.

*We're gonna talk later, **Cornelius***, Sören spoke into Anthony's mind.

Dooku stared straight ahead, not looking at Sören as he climbed in the passenger seat, the engine already going. The minute Sören closed the door, Dooku began pulling out, not even waiting for Sören to get his seatbelt on.

"That's not very safe, you know," Sören said, scrambling with the Force to get his belt on more quickly.

Dooku snorted, still not looking at him. He finally had something to say. "The man who went galavanting off across multiple universes for two years is suddenly worried about seatbelt safety."

"OK, could we not?"

Dooku had to twist the knife. "The man who had casual, unprotected sex with other men in other universes is suddenly worried about safety."

Sören narrowed his eyes. "First of all, you know we can't get those kinds of diseases anymore."

"Let us be honest, Sören, if you weren't immortal and you had the mini-portal you still would have done what you did."

Sören exhaled. Dooku wasn't wrong, but... "Second, those 'other men' were other versions of you and Maglor. One night. Only. We've been over this."

"The key word was 'other versions'. We might have the same DNA, look the same, and certain facets of our personalities might be similar, but different circumstances ultimately shape us into different people." Dooku's nostrils flared. "I still consider that infidelity."

"And I've apologized to you how many times now?" Sören was feeling less and less sorry every time he apologized, like it didn't mean anything - a bitter part of him wondered if he ought to have stayed in Étretat, instead of coming back to this. Then he felt guilty for feeling that way, thinking of his kids, Junior's issues in particular.

"As you know, apologies do not alter the past."

"Neither does holding it against me for the rest of my life," Sören said. "It's three months, we still can't be in the same space without ignoring each other or, or, or... this." Sören waved a hand, glaring over at Dooku.

"Three months, and as you know, you were gone *two years*." Dooku finally looked at him, fire in his dark eyes. Sören felt a frisson of arousal despite himself - Dooku was very sexy when he was angry.

"I had no idea it was that long or I would have come back sooner. But it felt like just a couple of weeks had passed -"

"You already knew from what Nat told you that time flows differently across worlds and you should have realized you were taking a risk with being away for an inordinate amount of time with only a few days."

Sören sighed and rubbed his face like an annoyed wet cat. He turned to look at Dooku - so beautiful in his wrath, it made Sören's heart break all over again, missing him. Missing their banter, their laughter... the Daddy/boy game with its moments of tenderness and feeling so safe, cherished, loved, cared for. He needed that now especially, after the horror he'd witnessed, but it felt like there was a wall of ice between them. And despite Sören's resentment at having to apologize over and over again - they'd had this conversation before, a few weeks after Sören's return when he'd made up with Anthony and tried to extend the olive branch to Dooku - Sören *did* feel bad that Dooku had gotten hurt.

In a way, it was like an ironic reversal of before. Fingolfin had felt guilt for their sin and had pushed Fëanor away, who finally snapped and burned the ships, ensuring Fingolfin could not follow. This time, Sören had felt guilt for killing "Dag" impersonated by Thor, had fled where Dooku could not follow... and came back to Dooku burning bridges.

It was a cold, cold fire. Sören shivered, despite the warmth of late Australian spring.

Their eyes met, and Sören saw there wasn't just anger in Dooku's eyes, but pain. Part of Sören wanted to reach out and offer a touch, a hug, see if warmth could melt the ice. But part of Sören was all wounded pride - he did only what he could do, with his limited coping skills, and...

"If you had seen with your own eyes what happened to some of my counterparts, or Anthony's," Sören spat out, "would you be able to make yourself go home and not help him? Really?"

Dooku didn't answer that, but looked away.

Sören dug in, with *I was right, I was right, stop hating me, you know I was right* singsonging in the back of his head. "And I told you all what I learned - that Justin Roberts is Nerdanel, reborn... that she was in league with Sauron and Morgoth all along. That Justin's actions across worlds supply Morgoth with power. I cut off as many lines as I could, and that might make a difference, not just for our other selves, but for us, here, when it's time -"

"Enough," Dooku growled, putting up a hand.

Sören tried not to smile. *I won.* Yet it felt more like defeat than victory.

"*We thought you were dead,*" Dooku gritted out. "*I thought you were dead.*"

"I really thought Huginn and Muninn would be checking in with you guys -"

"No, apparently they were keeping an eye on *you*, to provide you with the information you needed to keep you out of trouble," Dooku said. "As you know, the palantir only shows us this world, or the past of this world. Your device there accumulated quantum energy from the wormhole between worlds."

"I don't know what you want me to say," Sören said, feeling exasperated with both Dooku and himself... this entire situation. "How many more times do you need me to apologize -"

"You don't get it, do you? It's been three months, you were gone two years... and this was the second time *you left me.*"

Then Dooku pushed with the Force into Sören's mind, showing him a memory from 2020, before another universe's Dagor Dagorath was felt across worlds, before all hell broke loose.

"It feels like the world is ending."

"It feels like that," Sören said, nodding, "but as you know, feelings and reality aren't necessarily in agreement. The world hasn't ended yet. I'm still here. And I'm not going anywhere, Nico. I'm not going to leave you." He kissed Dooku's tears.

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

"Jæja, and I was a big stupid poopyhead," Sören said, desperately grabbing for what levity he could. "But you won't lose me again. I swear it." He grabbed Dooku's hand and pressed it to his heart, squeezing it. "I will never just... take off... again. I will never, ever leave you again."

Dooku's eyes were too bright. He blinked back tears. Sören's own eyes stung with tears, feeling the anguish across their Force bond, the broken trust. The broken dreams. A mental image of Dooku crying himself to sleep after Sören had left on his multiverse journey, thinking he was dead. Sören looked away, trying not to cry. Trying not to give in, because he was hurting too, frozen out like this.

"You gave me your word," Dooku rasped - Sören could hear how hard he was trying to keep it together, to preserve his dignity. "You gave me your word and then *you broke it.* Can you understand how that feels? Even just a little? It's only been three months since your return but it is going to take *a long time* to rebuild what was broken and frankly, I don't think I can try. Not with the history that lies between us."

Sören swallowed hard. He didn't even know what to say. His pride continued to sting, being frozen out like this, punished like this... he wished Dooku would understand, on his end, those feverish moments after he killed "Dag", not in his right mind; he wished Dooku could understand the fallout of the trauma that led him down the path to hunting down Justin, rescuing another world's Anthony.

Most of all, he wished he could do something to make it right, to ease Dooku's pain, to restore the love they had lost. He was angry with himself, as much as he was angry with Dooku for being like this.

"Fuck," was all Sören could reply, and Dooku rolled his eyes and returned his focus to the road.

They remained in awkward, painful silence for the rest of the way to the store. When they pulled up at the supermarket, Sören balked, reluctant to follow Dooku around inside the store, and this made Dooku even angrier, who used the Force to unbuckle Sören's seatbelt *and* open the passenger door.

Sören glared. "You can't leave me alone inside the car for five minutes? What am I, a child?"

"No," Dooku said, glaring back. "Worse. You're Fëanor." Dooku gestured imperiously to the parking lot. "Get out."

Sören rolled his eyes, swore under his breath, and climbed out of the car, trudging along behind Dooku, who marched ahead briskly. Sören slowed down, feeling bratty, and when it became apparent Dooku was too far ahead to supervise, he stopped in his tracks and gave Sören a stony stare over his shoulder. When Sören caught up, dawdling even more, Dooku hissed, "Do that again and I shall carry you around the store."

Sören's cock twitched in his jeans and he tried not to smile. He fought back the urge to tell Dooku *you might as well spank me, too*.

It was a very simple thing to get a bundle of fresh garlic and they would have been out of the store in a matter of minutes, but to annoy Dooku further, Sören went to the fountain drinks and mixed Mountain Dew and Sunkist together in a huge cup. He slurped loudly through a straw all the way out of the store, and in the car he blew bubbles in his drink until Dooku snapped, "Will. You. STOP THAT."

Sören gave an innocent smile that wasn't innocent at all, and then held out his cup, offering Dooku a sip, knowing perfectly well Dooku wouldn't partake.

"I don't know how you can drink that," Dooku grumbled.

"Very easy." Sören slurped again. "I put my lips on the straw like so -"

"You know what I mean."

Sören smiled again. "Well, it sure tastes better than your bitterness, Ñolofinwë."

Dooku glowered. "Don't test me, Fëanáro."

Sören's cock twitched again. He adjusted in his seat. Then, feeling sassy, he found himself repeating something Dooku had said to him all the way back in 2017, the year they'd met and gotten together. "Don't threaten me with a good time."

Dooku's brow furrowed, and Sören slurped at his drink some more before blowing bubbles again.

Sören couldn't resist trolling him a little more. "I'm surprised, you know."

"By *what*," Dooku snapped.

"The garlic. Thought your kind was repelled by that, Drac."

Dooku glanced over at him once more and Sören grinned. "You cannot joke your way out of this," Dooku said. "But then, I suppose you think life itself is a joke."

"OK, that's not fair." Sören was furious now, his teasing mood gone. "You know, you have some big fucking brass balls to say that to me, after what I went through. YOU weren't the one who had a god posing as your brother for half a year and had to kill him, wearing your brother's face, in self-defense -"

"And YOU weren't the one thinking one's husband would never return as the months wore on, and the months became years." Dooku shook his head. "You know..." Dooku exhaled. "Hindsight being 20/20... if I had known things would turn out like *this*, I would have never become immortal."

Sören shrugged. "We were guaranteed eternity; we were never guaranteed happiness."

Dooku gave him a withering, murderous look, and then he pulled over to the side of the road.

"Good." Sören unbuckled his seatbelt and got out of the car. "I'd rather walk the rest of the fucking way home than have to breathe the same air as YOU -"

Before Sören could get too far, Dooku was also out of the car and following. "Oh no. As you know, we have a rule, you are not to be alone and unsupervised, so you will turn around at once."

"Why the fuck did you pull over then?" Sören asked, continuing to walk, not looking back. "Do you really think I'm that much of an unstable asshole that I'm just going to portal off?"

"I don't know *what* you're capable of anymore, Fëanáro."

Sören kept walking and a few paces later, he felt himself being pulled with the Force. They were out in the open, but they were also on a country road and there was no one else driving by, no houses in the area, so the likelihood of being seen was low. Sören tried to resist the pull, but he kept sliding backward, like he was moonwalking. He stopped resisting and when he got close enough to Dooku, the pulling stopped - as Sören predicted - and that was when Sören finally turned around, waved a hand, and Force threw Dooku a few meters back, making Dooku fall on his ass in the grass at the side of the road.

Sören wouldn't hit a partner - he wasn't Justin Roberts - but they weren't partners anymore, and to Sören's way of thinking, Dooku had started it by Force-pulling him, so the throw was justified. Sören turned around again and resumed walking, hoping that would send a message, and the next thing he knew he himself was Force thrown into the grass on the opposite side of the road. Dooku got up, brushed himself off, and used the Force to lift Sören off the ground. Floating in the air, kicking and flailing helplessly, trying to break Dooku's lock on him, Sören flew across the road and into Dooku's arms. Sören responded with a vicious headbutt and Dooku fell again, taking Sören with him. They rolled around in the grass, trying to pin the other and establish dominance - they were both rock hard, and panting with exertion and arousal - and then a large shadow loomed over them, like a total eclipse of the sun.

Dooku and Sören both looked up. Sören's jaw dropped at two winged humanoid beings, like angels - or demons - swooping down. Sören froze, heart racing, pit of his stomach rising as he remembered the Balrog attack on this very day in 2021. These weren't

Balrogs as far as he could tell - the wings were off-white, not dark, and there was no smoke, no fire. But Sören still felt like a deer trapped in the headlights, an impending rush of doom.

Dooku grabbed Sören's arm and pulled him up. The winged beings alighted a few feet away, one blond, one with black hair, both wearing winged crowns and flowing white robes. Sören felt a strange sense of familiarity and then he realized what he was looking at.

Maiar.

"Eönwë," Dooku said to the blond with a polite nod, and then he cocked his head to the side, regarding the black-haired one with a curious look.

"Pallando," the black-haired one said in a flat, uninterested tone of voice.

"Right," Dooku said. He gave a small smile that did not meet his eyes. "To what do we owe this pleasure, gentlemen," he continued in a similar dry voice that let them know he did not consider this a pleasure at all.

"I think you know," Eönwë said, turning to look at Sören. His eyes were a bright, clear blue, like the sky. He was beautiful to look at, with soft, androgynous features, and his robe revealed muscular arms. The golden hair stirred in the breeze, glowing faintly with a light that was not from the sun. Sören would have liked to paint him...

...but he knew, now, why they were here and he didn't like it at all.

Eönwë held out his hand with a "give it" gesture. "The Silmarils, Fëanáro. I promise you if you surrender them, Manwë's peace will be upon you, the Doom ended once and for all, and you and your family will be safe until the end of Arda."

"Is that so," Sören said.

"It is so," Pallando said with a nod.

"And you're not, you know, Jail Crow and his butt-buddy in disguise, thinking I'm stupid enough to just give them to you." Sören folded his arms.

"If you like, I can summon Lord Manwë here himself," Eönwë said. "He will not be pleased to be disturbed, it is why he sent us, but if you require proof of our word -"

"And one of the other gods you're in league with can pretend to be Manwë?" Sören snorted. "You clowns really think I'm dumb as shit, don't you?"

Dooku turned to Sören. "In fairness, I don't think they're concealing their identity."

"Jæja, and 'Dag' pulled one over on us, too," Sören muttered bitterly, sneering at Dooku before he turned back to Eönwë and Pallando.

Sören's heart was still pounding, hammering away in his ears. He was cold, like he'd stepped into a refrigerator - the iron troll cross stung like ice against his chest - and he felt sick to his stomach. He was afraid, and ashamed of his fear. But there was something else alongside it. Rage. His fists were clenching hard enough that he could feel his nails digging in his palms.

Presuming Eönwë and Pallando were who they claimed to be, there was no way Sören would ever "surrender" the Silmarils, and he was offended to even be asked. He knew, of course, that the canon prophecy was for Fëanor to be released from Mandos at the end of the world, and it was said that Fëanor would finally give up the Silmarils. But whether it was the end of the world or not, he had no intention of yielding the Silmarils.

It was almost a tempting offer - that if he gave the Silmarils, he would be reconciled to the Valar, the Doom ended, his family protected. After all the hell they'd known, the promise of peace for the rest of their days was attractive... especially for Sören's children. There was nothing Sören would not do for his children, and he lived in perpetual fear that there would be another Balrog attack, or worse, targeting Kate, Tori, and Junior. He had been teaching them how to fight, but they were still teenagers and still *mortal*, not a match for gods. Even immortal, even Force-sensitive, even having killed gods, Sören felt weak standing before two Maiar, outclassed, fearing they would take the Silmarils by force if he didn't hand them over. The honeyed promise from Eönwë had a sting behind it - Sören had no reason to doubt that if he didn't quietly hand over the Silmarils, they would not only try to take them, but take Sören as well, away to Manwë for yet more punishment, as if he hadn't been punished enough.

The Silmarils for the end of the Doom, the promise of safety for his family - his children. Sören found himself putting a hand on the jeans pocket where they sat in a pouch, gently throbbing, warm.

But it wasn't a fair trade. They weren't just three shiny rocks, that held the light of the Trees. They were sparks of the Flame Imperishable, born in the light of love - of passion - that Fëanor had for his brothers, all-consuming fire. That Morgoth had coveted them and gone to such great lengths to steal them... that the Valar still craved them, and had sent the herald of Manwë here to negotiate, suggested that there was great power in those stones, power that Sören himself did not know the full potential of. Sören remembered Anthony dying after the Balrog attack. He had given Anthony some of his blood, touched by Ingwion - Freyr - but he had also drawn on the light of the Silmarils. Sören was inclined to believe that it was the Silmarils, more than his blood, that had stabilized and healed Anthony. The blood could give immortality, but Anthony had only faint scars after receiving mortal wounds. Maglor's hand had been healed by the same Silmaril that had burned it.

In another universe, Fëanor had worn all three Silmarils and gone off like a nuke, destroying an entire universe... shocks rippling through the entire multiverse, causing chaos.

And that seemed to just barely scratch the surface of what the Silmarils were capable of.

They were pure, raw power, and Sören knew such power in the wrong hands was dangerous. Even with what little they knew about the Silmarils back then, the Oath had been so severe, so terrible, because they knew they had to protect that power by any means necessary.

Back in the day, Fëanor and his family had killed maybe two dozen Teleri all told - who had attacked them first, drawing blades on Fëanor's sons. It had hardly been a genocide, it had been self-defense, and yet it had been the Noldor who were called kinslayers, all of them punished, like a nerd defending himself against jock bullies and being the one to get expelled from school while the bullies got off free. Maglor and Maedhros had committed a greater wrong, later, but it would have been even worse not to retrieve the Silmarils; the entire universe might no longer exist, if the Silmarils had gone from Elwing to someone else.

Sören was very sure that the Doom had ultimately not been about the conflict with the Teleri, or the later actions of his sons upholding the Oath. It had been because Fëanor had led a revolution, the Noldor rejecting the Valar, leaving to forge their own destinies. Fëanor had - rightly - called Manwë out on his mishandling of Morgoth, saying that the Valar were responsible for Morgoth's evil as much as Morgoth himself, and it had been a blow to Manwë's pride. Manwë could not take being criticized for his error.

And so it was that Fëanor and his family had died terrible deaths... except Maglor, who had been left to wander alone and traumatized through the ages. And when Fëanor and his family were reborn as mortals, it had been arranged to break their pride, the Doom weighing upon them through tragedies and horrors across the multiverse. This version of Sören had fared better than some of his counterparts, but he still had to endure both of his parents dying by the time he was six, and being raised by abusive guardians that would pave the way for him to end up in an abusive relationship as an adult, raped repeatedly. Then Sören had watched one of his partners die, one of his partners almost die, and his uncle and cousin-in-law killed by Balrogs. Then he had reunited with his "brother" just to find out it was a god taking revenge. Sören knew nothing had happened without Manwë's approval, and now when Sören was at his most demoralized state - after everything, killing "Dag" then witnessing the terrible fates he'd seen of himself and Anthony in other worlds, coming back just to find his absence had harmed his family and he'd lost Fingolfin's love, he might not ever completely fix things with his kids - Manwë had sent his herald to retrieve the Silmarils, as if to say, "Had enough?"

He had, in fact, had enough. The only thing keeping him from not hitting the bottle in his pain was not wanting to turn into Einar, not wanting to do that to his children. So he lived with it, he endured it, and he was *tired*. He, too, was starting to regret immortality. He would be fifty at the end of next month, he felt five hundred.

He was sure that if Eönwë and Pallando were in fact who they claimed to be, the promise of peace and reconciliation with the Valar was genuine... as far as the two Maiar were concerned.

He didn't trust Manwë, and he didn't think that Eönwë and Pallando would know that Manwe had no intention of upholding his end of the bargain, or at least, not in the spirit of the law. There was no way to ensure complete peace and safety without death. "The end of Arda" could very well mean the end of this version of Arda, and not an Arda remade, and Manwë could do that any time once he had the Silmarils.

If he surrendered the Silmarils, and they were in fact going to Manwë, Sören knew he was giving them to a tyrant. A tyrant who had been completely fine with murder, abuse, and rape, carried out by others, to show Fëanor and his family who was in charge. If he surrendered the Silmarils, all the suffering of his sons - and Maglor in particular - was for nothing.

Sören nodded. "I know what I have to do."

"Good man," Eönwë said, reaching out his hand.

Sören took out the Silmarils, put the first one in Eönwë's hand - and let it burn. Sören pulled back the Silmaril as Eönwë screamed, his hand turning red and blistered.

A sword appeared in Pallando's hand. Dooku pointed with his index and middle finger and hurled a bolt of blue Force lightning at the sword. Pallando got jostled a foot, twitching like he'd been tased... and then recovered, raised a finger and hurled Dooku back all the way

over to the other side of the road, Dooku landing hard, bouncing twice before he splayed on his back.

"*Ñolo*," Sören cried out, about to run to him to see if he was OK - the thought of Dooku being seriously injured or killed tore at him - and then Pallando was pulling him.

Sören pushed back with the Force, so hard it hurt, like his body was in a vise, his head especially, throbbing. Pallando continued to pull and pull and pull.

They knocked him to the ground without touching him... began to strike without touching him, landing blows in Sören's face, chest, stomach, groin. Sören could feel something like a feather at his hip, down his thigh - one of them was trying to take the pouch of Silmarils by telekinesis. Sören tried to wriggle and push out of their grasp, but each blow came harder, and Sören directed all his strength to the pouch of Silmarils, to *keep it on his body* even if it meant he died.

A punch hard enough to make everything go black for a few seconds promised that would be rather soon, if this kept up.

The Force wasn't going to be enough, and these were just Maiar; Sören didn't stand a chance against the Valar, the most ancient of gods other than Eru himself. Sören was loath to take out the other Silmarils and attack with them, lest the two Maiar escape with them.

Or I accidentally nuke the whole universe like other-Fëanor did.

More lightning hit, from a distance - Pallando and Eönwë were so busy attacking Sören that their guard was down. They were strong enough to only be pushed a few feet back, lightly shocked, but it was enough to break their hold. Sören looked across the road at Dooku, who was standing now, and watched as Dooku fired off another bolt of Force lightning at the two Maiar, then Ringil materialized in Dooku's hands.

But instead of Dooku charging across the street, suddenly Ringil appeared in Sören's hand, burning cold like dry ice. He would only be able to hold it for a short time so he had to make it count.

Sören took the mini-portal and jumped into a wormhole. With everything he had, he directed the turbulent, twisting, writhing mass of energy, and came back in directly behind Pallando. He drove Ringil through Pallando's back. When Pallando fell, Sören swung and chopped off the head. He used the Force to roll and pick up the bloodless severed head from the grass, grabbing it by the glorious flood of black hair, and tossed the head to Eönwë, who was so shaken his own sword clattered to the ground.

"Tell your Lord Manwë that Fëanáro let you live today," Sören said, and then he spat, and with the mini-portal he aimed across the road, a few feet from Dooku; they could have the car towed. The garlic they came for didn't matter now. Dooku waited for him, Sören ran across the street and he and Dooku jumped into the wormhole before Eönwë could meet up with them.

When they dropped into the sheep field at the farm, they were holding hands. They quickly let go, but there was a long moment when their eyes held - the faintest shimmer of hope for them - before Darren ran over to them, Huan bounding alongside of him, barking with alarm.

"Holy shit, what happened?" Darren asked.

Sören and Dooku looked at each other again.

"We have a situation," Dooku said calmly.

Chapter 21

There was an emergency family meeting for Sören and Dooku to explain what happened, and when their testimony was done, a long silence followed that was even more uncomfortable than the one Sören had endured in the earlier car trip with Dooku. Sören hoped he wasn't in for a lecture.

Finally Anthony broke the silence, pinching the bridge of his nose. "Well, we're in for it now."

Maglor nodded. "After Manwë puts Humpty Dumpty back together again, they're going to come back for us. Manwë isn't just going to let this go."

Sören sighed. "I'd say I'm sorry, but -"

Anthony put up a hand. "If nothing else, what you did to Pallando bought us a little time... for Manwë to put Humpty Hump back together, as Maglor said." Then Anthony caught himself and facepalmed. "Humpty Dumpty."

Sören had to go there. "*All right stop what you're doin', cos I'm about to ruin, the image and the style that you're used to.*"

Anthony glared at Sören, but his eyes crinkled at the corners. "Could we be serious?"

"I look funny, but yo I'm makin' money, see, so yo world I hope you're ready for me. Gather round, I'm the new fool in town -"

"You've got that right," Dooku muttered.

Sören stuck out his tongue.

Maglor cleared his throat. "Atya, please." Maglor's lips were quirked and Sören knew he was trying not to laugh.

Sören composed himself, but the annoyed look on Dooku's face made him grin, and he blew a kiss at Dooku, who rolled his eyes but his face softened a little. Sören remembered the way Dooku more or less saved his life out there, and he once again felt that glimmer of hope before he turned his focus back to the conversation...

...and the very real probability that there was no hope for anyone, that they were already dead.

"How long do you think we have?" Sören asked.

Anthony exhaled. "Probably a few hours, at most."

"I don't think the wards will hold against *Manwë*," Ali said, frowning. Medika and Darren nodded.

"No," Anthony agreed. "I don't think so either. I could call MI6 for reinforcements to come out here but even if they made it in time, we know a god and his servants could easily steamroll them, so I'd effectively be sentencing a lot of people to death and it wouldn't do much good."

"You're going to hate this suggestion," Sören said, "but we could get our bug out stuff and go hide out in another universe for awhile."

"That would be permanent," Anthony said, "because he'd just wait for us to get back."

Maglor nodded. "A few days, a few weeks, a few decades, centuries, millennia... is nothing to a god. He'll wait for us as long as it takes, if he doesn't outright go on a chase for us."

"And any universe that has other versions of us in it, we're taking a chance by being there," Anthony said. "It's too risky."

"And the sheep," Darren added. "We can't abandon the ranch like that."

Sören felt a stab of guilt - he cared about the farm animals, especially Gullinbursti. The cats could be put in carriers, Huan on a leash, but it was much harder to get an enormous golden boar around. "Fuck."

Anthony put his hands up, then he rubbed them together and closed his eyes, deep in thought - Sören could practically see the gears turning in his head. A moment later Anthony nodded to himself. "All right. I'm going to sound completely mad considering I shot down a similar suggestion 'Dag' made -" He made finger quotes, then went on, "I think our only option is to take the fight to the Valar. To go on the offensive, rather than defending ourselves."

"I agree," Ali said.

"It's like the advantage with the first move in chess," Dooku said.

"Right." Anthony rubbed his face, looking very tired. "Except we don't really have an advantage at all."

"No," Darren said. "At least one of us has to stay back here, besides Mum, and I'm volunteering myself. No offense Mum, but if Manwë sends his friends here, I don't want you to have to defend the kids by yourself."

"None taken," Medika said, patting her son.

"I've half a mind to tell Metallica and Megadeth to come home from uni," Ali said, "but they're hours away in Adelaide and even if we portaled them in, I don't want to make them have to take time off from school. I can't send the kids to them for safekeeping in a dorm room, either."

Medika sighed. "We should call Uncle Nat and get him to come out here and stand guard with us."

"I'll get on that right now," Darren said, getting up, using the Force to slip his phone out of his jeans pocket.

Anthony leaned back. "I agree at least one of us needs to hang back, but even if all of us went, even you, Medika, and Darren, *and* Uncle Nat... we would still be outnumbered and outmatched. We barely held up against the Norse gods. There is a very good chance that not all of us are going to make it back alive."

"We need more numbers," Dooku said. "Though we've heard that Galadriel is leading a resistance inside Valinor - one that Margrét left to join - we don't know how effective they'll be in helping us... if they haven't already been caught and punished."

"And while we could visit other universes and try to recruit other versions of ourselves, we'd be asking them to fight our battles, which doesn't seem fair... and they might be even less equipped to handle it than we are," Maglor said.

Sören frowned so hard his face hurt. He stroked his beard, considering, weighing and sorting all the information he had. He thought about his contemplation of the Silmarils out on the road - the power that was in them. Manwë wouldn't be demanding the Silmarils if he was more powerful than they and he didn't need them to gain power. The Silmarils could be used to heal - as they had with Maglor, with Anthony - and they could be used to maim and kill - they had burned Maedhros and Maglor, one had burned Eönwë today, and Fëanor had not only destroyed Morgoth but an entire universe with them, elsewhere. They were like small, magical nukes... or perhaps more like little supernovas.

The Silmarils could be weaponized in their fight against the Valar, and they could be used as first aid when they took hits... but there were fourteen Valar, countless more Maiar - perhaps even new ones, as the ages wore on - and Sören, Anthony, Maglor, Dooku, and Ali were only five people. Five people against fourteen powerful gods, even with the ultimate weapon in hand, was a curbstomp battle; it would be a miracle if any of them survived.

We need numbers. Numbers. Numbers...

Sören remembered the fight against Odin... and then, at the end, going to Valhalla.

"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."

"We need to make a detour," Sören said. "I have at least a few dozen warriors in Valhalla. I don't know how well they'll hold up against gods -"

"Cannon fodder," Anthony said, nodding, "but they signed up for that."

Sören didn't like it, but it would have to do. It still didn't feel like enough numbers - and then once again his mind's eye showed him the Silmarils healing Maglor, healing Anthony, and something clicked in his brain.

"We need to make a second detour. To the Halls of Mandos. To resurrect our dead."

Ali's jaw dropped. Darren's eyes widened. Maglor's eyebrows shot up.

Dooku and Anthony looked at each other, as if they were communicating something privately, and then Anthony gave Dooku the "go ahead" gesture.

"As you know," Dooku said, "some of our own died rather traumatically."

"By 'some' he means 'all'," Anthony said.

"If you resurrect them," Dooku continued, "they either wake up with all the trauma, in their human form, or with blunted, somewhat more distant but still present trauma, if they were to revert back to their original Eldar form. Forcing that on them, not giving them a choice, does not sit well with me."

"How do you know?" Sören asked.

"Let's just say I remember... things," Dooku said, and showed him the mental image of a silver-haired young woman awakening in dragon fire, holding her stomach where she'd been stabbed. *There are other worlds than these, Fëanáro.*

"I agree," Ali said, nodding. "As much as I want to see K-" She stopped herself from saying his name aloud, and covered her mouth for a few seconds, blinking, her eyes too bright. Sören felt the surge of hope and despair, mixing together, twisting like a storm, and he felt for her. He restrained himself from going across the room to give her a hug; Maglor put an arm around her and kissed her temple. Ali took her hand away from her mouth and resumed, steel in her voice. "As much as I want to see him again, I don't want him to have to live with... how he died... unless that's a conscious, deliberate choice to fight alongside us."

"I'm sure he will because it's *Finno*," Maglor said, "but yeah." He turned back to Sören. "Resurrection is different from re-embodiment, Ada. Re-embodiment takes time to put the fëa back together, it's not instantaneous, and we don't have the luxury of that kind of time right now, but if you want to try to raise our dead, the only ethical option is to let it be a choice even if that hurts our numbers, because we can't assume everyone will want that."

"Fine, I'm not in argument." Sören nodded and looked away - thinking of Frankie. Missing her. Wanting to see her again, wanting to hold her... wanting her to meet her son, growing into manhood. But he couldn't unsee the way he died - he still had nightmares about it - and that was just witnessing it, not living it. Sören's memories of his death as Fëanor were blunted by virtue of being in a different body, but he had nightmares about that, too, starting when he was four. He could still have visceral, full-body flashbacks and panic, reliving it, if he was triggered a certain way. He couldn't begin to imagine what it would be like to wake up with full muscle memory of the event, like it had just happened. "*Jesus*," Sören said under his breath, remembering Frankie burning up, heart breaking all over again. Her death had been cruel enough, never mind forcing her to live with it still fresh.

But he would offer her a choice, nonetheless, and he couldn't help the selfish little hope that she would choose life, and they would be together again. He still loved her, all these years later.

Anthony looked at the clock. "We ride at midnight," he said. "Any longer than that and we run the risk of them showing up. At least if they sense most of us are gone, Pallando and Eönwë are less likely to come here and attack a grandma and a bunch of kids, or at least that's what I'm hoping." Anthony grimaced. "My time in the Gulf taught me to never underestimate what one's enemies are capable of."

"Yeah." Sören thought of Nerdanel, shrieking with laughter as Fëanor took the death blows.

After dinner, Sören and Ali took Huan on a walk around the fields and brought Junior and Elanora with them. Moreso than Kate and Tori, Junior had been shaken by Sören's absence and Sören needed to make every moment count before he went off through the wormhole again.

Junior was in fact upset that Sören was going, but Sören explained it this time and Junior understood why. Junior understood a little too well, as his memories of being Curufin had begun to surface, slowly.

"I want to come with you," Junior said. "I want to fight."

"No." Sören tousled Junior's mop of black curls - Junior had enough of a growth spurt that they were almost the same height now. He pulled his son's head onto his shoulder, wondering if he'd live to see Junior hit the same height as him or taller. He gave Junior noogies, then a fierce, tight squeeze. "You're not ready to take on gods. I'm not even ready."

There was a long pause, and then Junior picked his head up and said, "Hi Not Even Ready -"

"Even if you take after me more than I'm comfortable with sometimes."

Junior smiled, and then he fell apart, crying. Sören wept with his son - he felt extremely guilty about running off like this, especially with the better-than-average chance of not returning - but he knew if he didn't do this, they *would* all die. At least this way, Manwe's attention was likely to be diverted away from the farm and the kids had more of a chance of surviving.

"I'm sorry," Sören choked out.

"Hi Sorry."

"When I get back, you're grounded." Sören was joking.

"You better get back." Junior snuffled.

"I won't give you false promises," Sören said, "but if anything happens to me..." He put his hands on Junior's shoulders. "You inherited my crazy genes and please do not, *do not* let them take you over. Please *do not* kill yourself or start drinking or using any drugs stronger than weed, to cope. If I don't come back, it's OK to grieve, it's OK to be sad, but honor my memory by living the best life you can and spiting those dirty motherfuckers who want your life ruined."

Junior nodded. "I'll try."

"That's all I can ask." Their eyes held, Junior's brown eyes too sad for fourteen. The family had tried to give the kids as happy and well-adjusted life as they could, but those two years away - and what had caused them - hung like a storm cloud over Junior's heart, the

boy who never knew his mother.

They played Super Mario with Ali and Elanora until it was time for the kids to go to bed. Even though Junior was fourteen now, Sören tucked him in, and for the first time since Junior was a small boy, Sören read him a bedtime story - *If You Give A Mouse A Cookie*, which had been Junior's favorite story in childhood.

Junior was, unsurprisingly, still awake when the book was done, and when Sören hit the light he lingered, looking at the brooding expression on Junior's face, the spitting image of his own at that age.

"I'm not gonna be able to sleep at all tonight," Junior mumbled.

Sören sighed deeply, then he had to. "Hi Not Gonna Be Able To Sleep At All Tonight, I'm Dad -"

Junior used the Force to hit Sören with a pillow.

Sören turned the light back on and got out another book - *Go The Fuck To Sleep* by Adam Mansbach. Junior cracked up laughing when he saw it. Sören sat down at Junior's bedside, opened the book, and began to read.

*The cats nestle close to their kittens now.
The lambs have laid down with the sheep.
You're cozy and warm in your bed, my dear.
Please go the fuck to sleep.*

When Sören finally left Junior's room, he was on his way out of the house to spend an hour alone in his forge, meditating - trying to calm himself down so he wouldn't make a fatal error of judgment with a non-clear mind - and he passed by the kitchen, where he heard Dooku, Anthony and Maglor having a conversation about the impending mission to Valinor.

"I am gravely concerned Fëanáro will do something rash," Dooku said.

Something snapped in Sören's mind. He marched to the kitchen and stood in the doorway with his hands on hips, and cleared his throat loudly. "Excuse you."

Dooku turned around slowly with a cool, amused look on his face, like he'd wanted Sören to hear that. "Why hello there. Good evening."

Sören made a "come here" gesture. "A word, please."

Dooku followed Sören out to the forge. The minute they got inside, Sören gave Dooku a mighty shove with the Force, backing him up against the anvil. "You know," Sören said, "you have some goddamn fucking nerve, shit-talking me to the others."

Dooku folded his arms. "As you know, what I said was not incorrect. Once again you went off for -"

"Two years. Like I don't fucking know that. Because *you'll never stop bringing it up*. Well, Nico, that was a different situation than this one. I am well and truly, bloody aware that if I do something impulsive right about now it could get all of us killed, and I am going to try my damndest to get us all home in one piece. The one thing I *will not* do is surrender the Silmarils, for what should be obvious reasons - if I give those up, we're all dead no matter

what that clown calling himself Lord of Arda says. But if you're concerned I'll raise the dead without their consent, if you're concerned I'll jump us all to another universe, if you're concerned I'll cut off your dick and throw it to Manwich Sloppy Joe as an offering to distract him so I can be the big damn hero and shank him... I'll be a good boy. You, on the other hand, concern me with your lack of trust and the potential for you to get in my damn way because you think I'm a bigger problem than those stupid fucks in Valinor."

Dooku glared. "I would not sabotage our mission."

"No, not intentionally. But you might very damn well unintentionally fuck everything up if you think I'm doing something 'rash' and you feel the need to save us from it."

"I know you," Dooku said quietly, his velvet voice turned to steel and ice. "I know what you're capable of."

"Right now, it seems like you don't know me at fucking all, you never did, if you think I'm going to toy with our lives or the rest of our family's."

"That's the thing. I don't know *what* to think after *you broke my trust* -"

"OH SPARE ME WITH YOUR FUCKING MARTYR ACT, ÑOLOFINWĒ, MKAY?" Sören gave Dooku another Force shove, this time landing him on top of the anvil.

Dooku's response was to Force throw Sören across the forge. Sören hit a wall and fell down.

Sören felt something like a volcano go off in his mind, followed by a mushroom cloud. He picked himself up - slowly - and then he charged across the room. Dooku waved his hand to Force throw again and just as Sören was about to land on the hard concrete floor of the forge, he Force threw Dooku at the same time, taking Dooku down with him. They crashed together, Dooku pinning him. Sören quickly rolled Dooku onto his back and pinned him. Before he could do anything else, Dooku grappled and rolled Sören onto his side, then rolled against Sören, his chest to Sören's back, and put him in a nelson lock. Sören's cock sprang to life, feeling Dooku's tight grip on his arm, the pressure at his neck, and then Dooku *bit* his neck, savage, and Sören heard himself moan, almost coming in his pants from the sweet sting of his teeth.

"I warned you not to test me, Fëanáro," Dooku rasped.

Feeling a primal mix of lust and rage, Sören elbowed him, and again, and landed a blow with the Force, hands-free, to wrench himself out of the hold. Dooku lunged for him again and Sören lunged back. They rolled around and around on the hard floor of the forge, biting, elbowing, kneeling...

...and at last their mouths crushed together, hard cock grinding hard cock through their pants. Sören reached out and tore Dooku's shirt off, flinging the ruined fabric aside, then he used the Force to grab one of the handmade knives on display and cut Dooku's trousers and briefs, freeing his red, engorged, veiny cock, already dripping precum. Sören put the knife down, and they kissed again, deeply, fiercely, as Dooku fumbled with Sören's jeans, at last wrenching them and his boxer-briefs down. Sören tugged his shirt up over his head, and shoved Dooku onto his back, kissing him hard as he used the Force to bring down a bottle of oil.

With Dooku on his back, Sören poured oil over both their cocks and leaned in to kiss him again as he took them both in his fist, rubbing them together in a tight grip. Sören felt

himself about to come, and stopped, letting his cock slide up and down against Dooku's cock instead, teasing them both. Sören shuddered, hole twitching, cock throbbing at the feel of Dooku's hands roaming over him, exploring like it was the first time - it had been too long. Sören's own hands raked through the silver fur of Dooku's chest, his arms and legs, savoring the feel of it and the sculpted, strong muscles underneath. They kissed and kissed until Sören couldn't take it anymore, and he straddled Dooku's hips and sank down.

The deep grunt of satisfaction Dooku made as he bottomed out in Sören, dark eyes rolling back in bliss - Sören could feel the pleasure of silken heat across their bond - almost set Sören off right away. Sören began to bounce, frantic in his need, broken cries rising against the slap of their flesh, Dooku's groans and sighs. The slight upcurve of Dooku's cock worked its wicked magic on that sweet spot inside him, and when Dooku's hand gripped his cock, it was too good. Sören reached out to pull on Dooku's nipples, rub and flick them with his thumbs, twist and pull some more. Dooku's free hand slapped Sören's ass and then he grabbed Sören's hips and drove into him with abandon, balls smacking wildly, making Sören ride him like a wild bull, making Sören work for it.

Dooku spanked Sören again. "Brat."

Sören bit his lower lip, cock pulsing, dangerously close. "Mmmf."

Dooku slapped Sören's ass again, then the other ass cheek, back and forth between them, making it sting so good. Sören pinched and pulled Dooku's nipples harder, until Dooku grabbed a fistful of Sören's short curls and brought him down, leaning up so they could kiss. Then Dooku's tongue and teeth were on Sören's neck, licking and nibbling down to Sören's nipples. Dooku's tongue lashed away before he sucked so hard it almost hurt, bit, and fucked it with his tongue again before swirling and brushing in slower, lighter strokes, suckling, kissing. Sören whimpered and cradled his head, continuing to buck madly on Dooku's cock, the sensation building and building.

"It's cute when you think you're in charge," Dooku growled before he licked Sören's throat, then bit Sören's neck again, before drawing a nipple into his mouth, tugging hard.

"Is that so."

"Mhm," Dooku moaned around Sören's nipple.

Sören used the Force to pick up the knife he'd put to the side and held it to Dooku's throat. Dooku looked up at him with feverish eyes - and Sören stroked Dooku's cheek.

"This is sharper than your tongue, Ñolofinwë," Sören said with a smirk. "But I see you've taken your due place." With that, he took Dooku's head and guided it to the other nipple. Dooku suckled hungrily.

Sören traced the knife down Dooku's throat... down to his heart. Then he cut, just enough to draw blood - blood that he knew wouldn't drip for long, with their Eldar-like speed healing. Just long enough. "Mine," Sören snarled and pushed Dooku back to lick the wound with a long, slow, sensual stroke of his tongue. He kissed it, feather-light, and licked it again.

Dooku pulled the knife from Sören's hand with the Force and brought it to Sören's own heart. "Mine," he purred as he cut, then chased the blood with his tongue, lapped, kissed.

Their mouths met again, sharing the metallic tang of their blood. Dooku smacked Sören's

ass one last time, grabbed Sören's cock and worked it viciously, until Sören whimpered into the kiss, urgent. Dooku groaned into the kiss and they came together, Sören's seed spurting where he'd cut over Dooku's heart, as Dooku spilled deep inside him, one blast, two, three, scalding hot. Sören threw back his head and howled, the pleasure throbbing, relief flowing, pulling him under, into darkness, into light, into fire.

They kissed, and Dooku's arms were around him. They looked into each other's eyes before they kissed again, and Dooku pulled Sören against his chest, held him, Sören listening to the strong drum of the older man's heart as the contractions died down and there was just peace.

Dooku pet his hair, and Sören snuggled into him, making contented noises... and then Dooku slapped Sören's ass again, making Sören yelp.

Sören gave him noogies, and they started rolling around again, grappling, trying to pin each other, lock each other. Their cocks rose back to life, and when Dooku bit him again Sören heard himself beg, "More. Oh god, more, please..."

Dooku laughed softly, ran his finger down Sören's shaft, and gave him another kiss before he rolled Sören onto his stomach. He grabbed at Sören and positioned Sören's body on all fours, face down, ass up. Sören wiggled his ass, panting for it, and Dooku smacked it again before the tip of his cock was at Sören's open, creamy hole. Sören let out a guttural noise, fists clenching as he felt Dooku push inside his sensitized passage. "God, yes," Sören cried out; he'd missed this so much.

Grabbing onto Sören's curls, Dooku fucked him hard, their hips slapping together, balls slapping together, showing no mercy. Sören loved it, whining like an animal in heat, crying out as Dooku nibbled the back of his neck, his shoulder.

"More," Sören panted, rocking his hips back at Dooku, fucking himself on that cock angled just right, pleasure climbing higher and higher, deeper and deeper, so full, all-consuming, all that existed. "More, oh god, more, *more*..."

"Good boy," Dooku gritted out, knowing how much Sören loved that. "Good boy. Good boy..."

"More, yes, more! Oh god, more! *Fuck!*"

At last Dooku pulled Sören up, his furry chest teasing Sören's back, and with one arm around him, and his other hand holding the knife to Sören's throat, he pounded into Sören for all he was worth, teeth on the sweet hollow where Sören's neck and shoulder met, using the Force to grip and squeeze and rub Sören's cock, a caressing invisible touch all over Sören's body, and when Dooku growled Sören was undone and climaxed, shattering, spraying the wall with his seed as he sobbed with the strength of his release. Two thrusts later Dooku cried out "*Fëanor*," and Sören sighed at the feel of being flooded again, marked, claimed.

They were laying on the cold concrete floor, Dooku spooning him, arms around him. Sören took Dooku's hands and squeezed. He let out a little whimper of protest as Dooku pulled out, then Sören giggled as he felt his hole contract, gushing out the seed spent, a puddle on the floor. "Oops."

Dooku spanked Sören's ass. He sat up, caught his breath, and then he facepalmed and started laughing.

Sören sat up and realized what he was laughing at - the ruined clothing on the floor. "Oh, did I do that?"

Sören used the Force to pull his leather apron from the wall and threw it at Dooku, who raised an eyebrow.

They lingered in the door of the forge, arms around each other, Sören looking up into Dooku's eyes. Sören cackled maniacally at the comical sight of Dooku only in an apron - ass hanging out for the short trek to the house - and Dooku rolled his eyes, turning pink.

Then Dooku frowned. "This isn't completely resolved yet."

"Oh, goddammit," came a voice from the nearby shadows.

Sören and Dooku found Maglor and Anthony eavesdropping. They gave guilty smiles and waves and then, looking at Dooku in the leather apron, Anthony fell on the ground, heaving, tearing up. Maglor wolf whistled. "Wow, that's... that's a look," Maglor said.

Dooku put his hands on his hips and glared.

"Are you two spying on us?" Sören folded his arms.

"You were kind of loud," Anthony said, leering as he got up.

"I was going to congratulate you," Maglor said, "but then..." He gave Dooku a shove. "Can't you guys just forgive each other now? Do I have to get you two a Get-Along shirt?"

"It would be a better fashion choice than what he's got on now," Anthony said with a smirk. He snapped and said, "I have one thing to say, you betta work."

"ARE YOU QUITE DONE." Dooku's face was murderous.

"Not yet. Please tell me you're not wearing that to Valinor," Anthony said.

"Oh no, he totally needs to wear that to Valinor, and moon Manwë," Sören said, not able to resist.

Dooku pinched the bridge of his nose and made wounded animal noises. Then he and Sören exchanged glances - Sören felt the crushing weight of disappointment that Dooku was still hurt and angry - and Dooku turned back to Anthony and Maglor. "As you know, something of this magnitude cannot just be gotten over instantaneously. It is going to take time, and -"

Maglor put up his hands. "OK, fair. But promise me that... whatever hard feelings are left between the two of you... don't turn what we're about to do into a pissing match. We have a difficult enough fight ahead of us without us being divided against each other."

Anthony nodded. "Live together, die alone."

Sören turned to Dooku and put out his hand. Dooku took it, and Sören felt a small touch of relief.

He only hoped that they would return to keep moving forward, and that this had not been their last time before the end, the final Doom.

Chapter 22

Retrieving the warriors who'd elected to stay in Valhalla instead of being reborn was easier said than done, Sören discovered: the physics of Valhalla were such that the warriors appeared to have physical forms in the realm, but when they left they were pure energy - invisible, unable to be seen or felt, only perceived, what people would call ghosts or spirits. This was a problem if they were going to assist in the fight against the Valar and Maiar. They needed to be resurrected.

Baldur, one of the few survivors of the Ragnarök, helped by serving a horn of mead to the warriors that, somehow, generated flesh bodies, and he wished them good luck as they left the realm for the first and last time.

Sören stopped to hug his uncle Böðvar, accompanied by the wolves Geri and Freki. Already, Sören was overwhelmed by emotion, tearing up as his uncle's arms tightened around him.

His uncle, who had once been his son, Celegorm.

"It's good to see you too, lad," Böðvar gruffed. "How long has it been? What year is it now?"

"2034."

Böðvar's eyebrows shot up, his mouth opened. "Fuck, that long?"

Sören nodded solemnly; he could barely believe it either, it had been thirteen years since the Ragnarök. Then Sören added, "I'll be fifty soon."

Böðvar chuckled. They pulled apart and Böðvar put an arm around him, clapped him on the shoulder. He took a deep breath, sobering. "Is Medika -"

"She's still alive. She'll be happy to see you if... we make it." Sören shook his head. "Not gonna lie, we probably won't."

"Well, at least we'll give them hell," Böðvar said. "If we go, we're going to take as many of those fuckers out with us as we can."

Sören smiled.

"Just the same, though, I don't intend on dying today." Böðvar squared his shoulders. "I'm going home to my wife when this is done."

Sören smirked. "Hi Going Home To My Wife When This Is Done -"

Ali groaned loudly from a few paces behind and then she ran up to hug her father for the first time in thirteen years. "Da."

"Possum."

"Da." Ali broke down sobbing.

Böðvar cried a little too. "Shit, I think I've got allergies." A smirk. "Allergic to Manwë,

probably."

They held each other, rocking, crying - the reunion of Böðvar and Ali made Sören cry all over again, touching and beautiful. "My baby girl," Böðvar choked out, squeezing Ali. "My baby girl..."

"You've got a granddaughter you've not met yet," Ali said. "She's back at the farm, Darren is looking after her while we take care of this."

"He's doing well?"

"Yeh." Ali sniffled. "He and Mum are good, Da. And Auli and Huan too."

"Good."

The very real fear that none of them, or most of them, wouldn't survive this, seized Sören. He wanted, very much, for Medika and Darren to be reunited with Böðvar, for Böðvar to meet Elanora, to see Metallica and Megadeth doing well at uni, to see Darren's son Brian at the 2036 Olympics. It seemed unfair, unjust, that Böðvar would be resurrected just to be lost again. That thought filled him with rage.

And that had barely scratched the surface of Sören's rage, the injustice they were fighting. They shouldn't have had to be in this position, and they were, *because some tinpot dictator calling itself a "god" has to swing his nonexistent dick around*, Sören thought to himself bitterly. He wondered, then, if it would be well and truly over when this was done, if any of them lived. If other pantheons, other gods, would know what Sören and his family had done... and would be next to come for them.

So long as there were more powerful, advanced beings calling themselves gods, feeding on the energy of people's prayers and rituals, Sören knew they would never be safe. It would only be a matter of time before another group of gods decide they were a threat that needed to be eliminated. This was the second war in many they would have to fight.

That was no life Sören wanted to live - he was already tired - and yet, he didn't want to just give up and die.

Don't worry about trouble that hasn't started yet, Sören told himself. *Right now you have to focus on this.*

But Sören couldn't help pondering it - the tendency for his mind to be scattered many places at once started back when he was Fëanor - and Anthony, sensing it, kept pace with him, leaning in to kiss Sören's cheek. Anthony took his hand. "Let's get through this," Anthony said, and then with an eyeroll and a little smile he added, "so I can have the bureaucratic clusterfuck of having to forge identities for a bunch of newly-rezzed people about to re-enter Earth's population."

Sören laughed.

Sören, Anthony and Dooku jumped in to Mandos right at Námo's back, as Námo was

strolling through the halls. Before Námo knew what was happening, Sören and Anthony stabbed him in the back, and Dooku came around and drove Ringil through the god's throat.

Námo started to fall, spitting up a dark violet substance like blood but not blood - *ichor*, Sören thought to himself, remembering comparative mythology - but gods being gods were hard to kill enough that they knew there needed to be just a little more to ensure he was dead.

Sören recalled thirteen years ago, when he was training himself to eventually take on the gods - using the Force to shatter knives, explode coffee cans; at last in Asgard, Sören applied that technique to Odin.

With Námo's guard down, his power weakening with the wounds, Sören took a deep breath and began to push out a squeezing pressure, hard enough to make himself feel like he was going to rip apart, a weight like lead, crushing him, knocking the air out of him. But at last Námo's eyes rolled and the rattle came and he shattered into glittering ash like stardust, spraying everywhere. Sören's jaw dropped as he watched the particles fly and fade, a pile on the floor shrinking down until it was no more.

Maglor, with the warriors of Valhalla, led by Böðvar, made short work of the guards. The doors were opened, and light streamed out of each room.

The first to come out was Galadriel. Anthony gasped.

Sören had experienced telepathic contact with Galadriel a couple of times over 2020 and 2021, and Galadriel had visited Anthony in a vision after the Balrog attack, manifesting three strands of her hair to prove the communication had been real. They knew from that encounter Galadriel had finally taken Feanor's side and was leading a resistance in the Undying Lands. But they had not heard from her since 2021, thirteen years ago now. Sören had just assumed there was "radio silence" to avoid discovery.

Now he knew - the resistance had been discovered and intercepted. More of them came out: Míriel Perindë. Margrét-as-Findis.

The tears came again as Sören watched them walk towards him and the others. But he broke, hard, when he saw Finrod, all mellow gold, smiling like a sunny day.

Finrod was the first to hug him. "I know," he said, clinging tight. Sören sobbed and Finrod made soothing noises, rocking him.

Then Ali let out a wail and Sören looked up and saw Kenny. And Frankie.

"Hey, you dumb cunt," Frankie said, punching Sören's arm. She wrinkled her nose, eyes laughing. "Wot the fuck did you cut your hair for?"

Sören picked Frankie up and kissed her hard. Her lips were cold as ice, her tongue was cold - she was still dead - but he didn't care.

"Ahem."

There was Sigurð, Sören's father, who had died before little Sören could form memories of him. Sören had seen old photos of him, but the family resemblance was obvious - Sigurð had black curls falling to his shoulders, the same facial hair, warm brown eyes, a very similar face but with slightly different features. He and Míriel walked hand-in-hand

and Sören put Frankie down, who went to embrace Margrét, then Sigurð and Míriel hugged their son together, and Sören finally realized something:

"Ada."

Sören felt like an idiot for not realizing sooner that Finwë had been reincarnated as Sigurð, and that made the reunion all the more bittersweet. Finwë and Fëanor had a fraught relationship until the end, reconciling during the exile to Formenos. Finwë's death had hurt all that much more for Fëanor feeling like he hadn't had enough years with his father.

"Ada." Sören broke harder. "*Pabbi*."

"Look at you." Sigurð took Sören's chin in his hand. "All grown up now."

"You've got grandkids, too." Sören's jaw trembled and he leaned on his father's shoulder, never wanting to let go, as Míriel pet him.

Margrét had elected to transform back into Findis as she started the journey to the Straight Road, years ago, but it didn't make a whole lot of sense why Brynhildur had returned to her original form of Míriel, and Dag to Finrod, yet Frankie was still herself and not in Lalwen's body, Kenny was still himself and not in Fingon's elven body, and Sigurd was still himself and not in Finwë's body. Sören wasn't going to try to figure it out now, and it didn't really matter. Ali hugged Kenny, Anthony hugged Finrod and Galadriel, then Maglor took turns hugging all of them. Sigurð hugged Anthony and Dooku, then Frankie and Margrét hugged them, then Margrét, Finrod, and Sören hugged, while Kenny hugged Dooku, then Böðvar, then Sören himself.

There were so many tears - everyone was crying now - but this time the tears unnumbered were not of despair, they were of joy, to be together again at long last. They might all yet die very soon, but at least they had this, one more time.

Maglor finally whistled, and all eyes were on him. "Hi, sorry," Maglor said. "Look, I hate to do this, but we won't have much time before the other Valar sense what happened to Námo, so we need to make this quick, about why we're here... what you're potentially getting into."

After the "informed consent" speech about the traumatic death memories that would come with resurrection, Margrét-Findis, Finrod and Galadriel chose to be resurrected in their elven bodies, Kenny and Sigurð still chose to be resurrected in their human bodies, Míriel chose to be resurrected in her human form of Brynhildur...

...and Frankie did not want to be resurrected, either in her human form or as Lalwen.

"It's weird," Frankie said. "I know *that* I'm dead, and I remember you, the others, but everything feels... distant. Like watching a movie about stuff that happened to someone else."

Sören nodded. That made a certain amount of sense; he imagined the parts of the Halls that weren't the Hells would be impossible to endure otherwise.

"But..." Frankie shook her head. "I do know what happened, and I... I don't want to feel it." Frankie exhaled. "You and Margrét were two of the only good things that happened to me. My life was *shit*. Even if we work on a better life, back in Australia - I don't think I can, and I don't want our son to see me all fucked up."

"I think Junior would just be happy to have his mum again," Sören said, heart sinking.

Frankie shrugged. "And if I go back to being Lalwen, the memories are still there, not as strong, less distant than in the Halls but more distant than being human... but I hated every minute of living in Valinor. This was never my home. I would just get angry with myself, feeling like I've sold out. I'd never feel at home, at peace there, even with the Valar gone." Frankie snorted then. "I guess being dead is the most punk rock thing I've ever done, I dunno."

Sören hugged her tight again - that answer was so Frankie, and exemplified why he loved her.

It hurt, to know she had suffered so much in both worlds that she'd rather stay dead, and Sören was heartbroken. He had a feeling that the Halls would eventually fade or "fold up" the longer Námo was dead, and it would be even harder to visit with Frankie, wherever that ended up sending her. But he couldn't, and wouldn't, force her. It made Margrét weep, but she understood as well.

When they were all ready - or at least as ready as they ever would be - Sören took out the mini-portal; they would jump directly into the temple where the Valar dwelled. Sören was dreading it, his heart pounding, feeling sick to his stomach.

"Good luck," Frankie said, giving him one last hug and a kiss... then she grabbed him, pulled him down, put him in a headlock, and gave him noogies. "Kill those fuckers."

"We'll try." Sören blinked back tears - he didn't know if they'd ever see each other again, and he didn't want her last memory of him to be seeing him cry. He took her hands. "I love you."

"I love you too."

Sören exhaled and spoke from his heart. "*Sönn ást deyr aldrei.*"

As soon as they jumped into the temple, Sören got a feeling that something was very, very wrong.

He'd seen the destination in the mini-portal; he remembered it from dozens of visits in his life as Fëanor. He was sure they were in the right place, in the right universe.

But it was all dark. It wasn't pitch - it was dim, with very low visibility, just enough to make

out the outlines of marble columns and crystal chandeliers and windows of stained glass and hanging tapestries and fountains and...

...shrubbery and flowers that had withered. Bare trees. Burned, ruined tapestries, broken glass. Fountains run dry. Cracks in the marble.

Sören reflexively took a few steps back. He was about to tell them to abort the mission - this might be a trap, the temple in the beginning of a self-destruct - and then he felt the ground shake, strong enough to bring him to his knees. Anthony steadied him. There was a smaller aftershock.

That was when Sören saw it - puddles of ichor, piles of the same sort of glittering ash like Námo had been reduced to, except there were crowns, scraps of fabric, loose jewels, bits of hair, that were starting to disintegrate and fade, but just enough of remains, of evidence, that something had happened.

Then there was the foulest stench Sören had ever smelled in his life, worse than cat piss or shit or rotting meat or fermented fish or sulphur... somehow like all of these things combined but much, much worse. It made Sören want to retch.

The ground was shaking again, like a stampede. Sören smelled smoke, and felt the heat of fire. Smoke was rolling in, ash, sparking embers.

"Orcs!" Maglor warned. "Balrogs incoming!"

Just as a horde of Orcs galloped in, one Balrog materialized and lashed with its whip; Sören rolled out of the way just in time, Anthony dropping to cover him. Another Balrog popped in and lashed out, and they rolled again.

They rolled right to the feet of a hulking giant, as tall as the high ceiling, huge muscles like he'd been carved of granite, wearing a crown of iron spikes, clad in elegant silky black robes with an artfully tattered black cloak clasped with a fire opal, chiseled pale features with white-ice eyes, a flood of inky hair with iridescence visible even in the dimmed Unlight.

Iridescent like crow feathers.

Wielding a hammer even larger than Thor's.

"Hello, Fëanáro, my old friend," Morgoth said.

Chapter 23

Oh shit, I'm dead.

Anthony grabbed Sören tight as Morgoth reached down for them. They rolled again - though Sören didn't know if it would be enough to evade his grasp - and then he saw Ali and Kenny swinging on one of the chandeliers. Ali and Kenny dropped down onto Morgoth's shoulders. Ali shocked him with Force lightning, and Kenny had one of the Valhalla warrior's spears and jabbed it into Morgoth's nose, making it bleed ichor. Before Kenny could take the spear and drive it into Morgoth's throat, Morgoth flicked them away like they were tiny gnats, sending them hurling across the temple. Sören screamed - a hard fall at that velocity was likely to kill them - and Dooku interrupted his battle with a Balrog to put out his hand and gently guide Kenny and Ali down to the floor.

Sören glanced around the room, wanting to retch again from the Orc stench, the smoke and fire of the Balrogs. The Orcs had made short work of most of the warriors of Valhalla, broken bodies on the floor. Galadriel and Findis were armed with spears from the fallen, and Brynhildur had a battle-axe, Sigurð a sword. Sören gasped as he watched Brynhildur cleave an Orc in the heart and the gut, intestines and blood spraying everywhere, and he let out a little shriek as Sigurð decapitated an Orc, head bouncing and rolling to the ground. Findis speared an Orc in the cock, and when it fell, in the throat. Galadriel speared one Orc in the gut, then another.

Finrod, Dooku, Maglor and Böðvar were fighting Balrogs. Böðvar's experience of being killed by them lent him a certain ferocity - it was like watching a Viking berserker as Böðvar, armed with two battle-axes, chopped whips and swung madly, hacking wings, hacking limbs. Dooku used Ringil to ice-burn Balrogs, and Maglor and Finrod jumped onto the chandeliers and rode them to stab at the flying ones. Geri and Freki were attacking Orcs as well, biting and clawing them.

An Orc reached for them. Anthony used the Force to pick up a spear from one of the fallen and it flew right into the Orc's forehead, making it topple backwards, crashing into another Orc. Anthony used the Force to pull the spear out of the forehead and then he drove it through the heart and back of the Orc, impaling the one caught underneath. He spat as he pulled Sören to his feet.

Ali shocked Morgoth with Force lightning again, which wasn't enough to kill him but was enough to slow him. An Orc came for Kenny and Kenny Force-choked it before he drove a spear into its stomach.

Suddenly, Sauron materialized into the temple, hair warm white-gold, eyes orange like fire.

Sören tried to Force choke Sauron and was thrown back several feet for his trouble, crashing into an Orc who grabbed him in his enormous fist, squeezing before Galadriel cut off its arm. Sören pushed with the Force and pried the fist off him and watched Galadriel spear the Orc in the back, toppling it, then she pulled Sören up with a nod - Sören noticed her hair mussed, her face and usually-immaculate dress stained with Orc blood and bits of Orc guts - before she turned her attention back to killing Orcs, as cold and detached as if she were cooking a meal.

Sauron waved his hand and began pulling Ali and Kenny towards him - choking them.

Böðvar stopped what he was doing immediately and whistled at Geri and Freki, who were still attacking Orcs. "Sic em," Böðvar said, pointing at Sauron.

Geri and Freki bounded over, pounced on Sauron, and knocked him to the floor, snarling viciously as they bit and scratched him, tearing off chunks of flesh, making him bleed ichor as Sauron screeched. Finrod and Maglor nodded at each other; Finrod hopped down from one of the chandeliers he was riding and drove his sword into Sauron's gut just as Geri tore Sauron's throat and Freki bit off Sauron's nose. Sauron began to dissolve into sparkling ash and Finrod started singing softly, "*Who let the dogs out...*"

There was another quake - it seemed like Sauron's death had triggered some sort of "dead man's switch" to bring out yet more Orcs, another stampede with more pouring in. Sören wondered where the hell Sauron was getting all these Orcs from, after the War of the Ring, and then he felt a surge of nausea, mind dizzying as he realized. Morgoth hadn't just killed the Valar...

...this was what happened to at least some of the population of Valinor.

Elves had been twisted into Orcs, Maiar had been corrupted into Balrogs.

"Oh god." Sören dry heaved. "Oh god oh god oh fuck oh god oh shiiiiiiiiit -"

Sören pushed with the Force, squeezing and blowing apart one Orc, then another, as Anthony used the Force to choke a Balrog here, a Balrog there. But they were outnumbered, and constantly having to dodge swarming Orcs.

We're going to fucking die. Sören swallowed hard, still trying to give it his all, even as each exploding Orc took more and more out of him.

There was the sound of galloping hooves. Baldur rode in on Sleipnir, the eight-legged horse - a living portal - and Baldur cleaved the head from one Orc, then another, before stabbing a Balrog in the back. Magni and Modi followed riding on the back of Gullinbursti, the two of them wielding their father Thor's hammer - Sören got the idea they'd been to visit the farm - and they swung the hammer at Orcs, knocking them down then smashing them to bits, Orc blood and guts flying everywhere. Gullinbursti gored through a horde of Orcs like knocking down dominoes.

Through this, Morgoth had been recovering from being shocked by Force lightning, like he'd been tased, but now he was moving again.

Moving slowly. Limping. That had been Fingolfin's parting gift.

Ñolo. Sören watched Morgoth heading in Dooku's direction, and his adrenaline surged, heart hammering in his ears. He thought of the vision he'd had of another world's Dagorath, Morgoth destroying Fingolfin and Finarfin... Fëanor with nothing left to lose.

Sören watched Morgoth conjure something like a sphere of black lightning in his hand, raising his hair - like an unholy Van De Graaff generator. The same black lightning Sören had seen in that vision fourteen years ago; Sören wondered now if this world's Morgoth had seen the same vision, had been taking notes.

Sören grabbed Anthony's arm and with his other hand he took the mini-portal and they went out with a *pop*. There was the sickening drop, the turbulence, as Sören guided the stream to go where Dooku was still fighting Balrogs and Orcs, swinging Ringil, and then they dropped in, Sören using all of his strength to knock the three of them out of

Morgoth's path, like bowling pins. Morgoth turned, his fearsome white-ice eyes meeting Sören's, and he raised his hand.

Dooku got between them, shielding Sören with his body, and now Anthony took the mini-portal and they popped out again.

We have to take him out, Sören spoke into both their minds as they hurled through the wormhole around and around the temple.

I agree, Anthony replied, *but if you use all three Silmarils you run the risk of not just destroying him, but destroying everything.*

Sören had to think fast. In his mind's eye he had another vision: the creation of the Silmarils.

"You belong to us."

"Ours. Not hers."

Fëanor forgets about his wife, forgets about his troubles, loses himself in every kiss, every touch, every fuck, wanting them more than he ever wanted her. When they come together it is glorious. Fëanor feels infinite, the three of them three parts of one greater, bright, brilliant whole.

Finarfin's silver-gold hair and Fingolfin's blue-flame eyes captivate him. There is hope here, there is light. So much that it rivals the light of the fire in the hearth... the light of the stars in the sky.

He wraps Finarfin's silver-gold hair around himself like a blanket, and he feels absolutely safe. Like he has come home. The last thing he sees before he closes his eyes are Fingolfin's, brilliant blue like the stars under which their people Awakened.

Fëanor thinks of that moment, holding it close to him after they have gone back to their estates and he is in the forge again, alone. He wants to capture that moment... that feeling... its energy, its power. Fëanor thinks the power of their love for each other is the strongest force in the world, the fuel to his fire, the source of the magic that he weaves with each weapon, each shield, each piece of jewelry.

When he has everything he needs, he gets to work. He keeps reliving that moment of laying with his brothers by the fire, pushing his strongest feeling of love into the stones... remembering that joy, that hope, that peace. The three stones glow like small suns, glorious.

They are so much more than jewels. Each of them has a piece of his soul. A spark of his fire. Their light.

He works tirelessly in the forge, crafting the jewels, remembering the light. That feeling of how everything is beautiful and nothing hurts. The joy, the wonder chasing away the pain. The three jewels burn like three little suns.

They burn like his love for them, the way his love for them makes him love life. The way the beauty of their love makes all things beautiful.

Sören thought of the way they shielded each other, saved each other, here in battle. Even with he and Dooku still having problems, they'd loved each other enough to help each

other when the Maiar attacked them, and now in their stand against Morgoth.

Their love was stronger than Morgoth's hatred.

Anthony and Dooku's love balanced Sören out, gave him strength, stability. He thought of the ink on his arms, his back, the balance of fire and water. If Sören tried to destroy Morgoth with the three Silmarils it might be too much, but if the three of them worked together, it might be just right - just enough to kill Morgoth, without bringing down everything else.

There was only one way to find out.

Sören took out the Silmarils. He handed one to Dooku and the other to Anthony. "Let's distract him first," Sören said, "so when he thinks he's fighting off something else... then we strike. Doing what I did with exploding the Orcs, but drawing on these."

Anthony and Dooku nodded.

They popped back out at Morgoth's feet and together, the three of them hit Morgoth's ball of black lightning with blue Force lightning, making it short out. Then Dooku gave Morgoth a smile and a wave. "Greetings, Morgoth. Remember me?" He saluted with Ringil. "Remember this? As you know... our last meeting was quite unfortunate... for your foot."

He drove Ringil into the opposite leg from the one he'd lamed as Fingolfin. The sword looked even more like ice, gleaming crystal-white as it stabbed into the Dark Lord, spraying ichor.

Morgoth shrieked and then he waved his hand and knocked Dooku over, raised his hand and locked up Dooku's limbs. Just as he was about to bring down the hammer and crush Dooku as he had once crushed Fingolfin, Sören and Anthony *pushed* together, the Silmarils lighting up the temple in searing, blinding white light. Morgoth took a step back, wobbling, grimacing in pain. He unlocked his hold on Dooku just enough for Dooku to take the third Silmaril and push with them.

The light grew brighter and brighter and brighter, until nothing could be seen but the light, like the flash of a nuke going off. They pushed and pushed, aiming the light at Morgoth, scorching him, every cell, every atom.

Suddenly there was a horrible crunching sound and black ash sprayed everywhere, a horrible endless cloud of it, almost drowning in it. They kept pushing, pushing, pushing, and the ash-sand finally stopped spewing and dissolved, leaving only the light, which started to fade as Sören, Anthony and Dooku let go, collapsing together.

Morgoth was no more, utterly destroyed by the Silmarils - by the power of the three Finwion brothers, standing together as one - and the last of the Orcs and Balrogs had fallen.

Anthony and Dooku still held onto the Silmarils, and before they could hand them back over, Sören looked down and saw the Silmaril in his own hand had shattered into three smaller teardrop-shaped pieces. Still glowing bright, sparkling with rainbows, pulsing and warm... but smaller. There were two large Silmarils and three small ones, now.

Sören sighed and closed his eyes, passing out.

Chapter 24

Sören woke up in bed - the same bed he had shared with Dooku and Anthony, and sometimes Maglor, at the ranch, before his return from his travels across the multiverse where he'd moved into the forge. Daylight was streaming over him through the gap in closed curtains...

...and Dooku was sitting at his bedside. When their eyes met, Dooku reached out to take his hand, and stroked it with his thumb.

"Nico," Sören rasped. His mouth was parched.

Dooku smiled, his dark eyes warm. "Hello."

"Hi."

"Hi."

"Hi."

"Hi."

"Hi."

"Hi."

"Hi."

"As you know, hi."

Sören laughed, which made him cough with the state of his dry mouth. Dooku waved his hand and a bottle of water floated over. Sören sat up and began to drink.

"We're still alive," Sören said after a few sips.

"And Morgoth is not."

"Good." Sören let out a sigh of relief. Instinctively, he reached in his jeans pocket for the pouch of Silmarils. It was there, along with the mini-portal.

"We had to take the Silmarils out of your hand and put them back in the bag, because you collapsed," Dooku said, knowing what Sören was doing.

"Thank you. How long was I out?"

"Approximately four hours."

"OK, that's a relief. Didn't want to wake up and find out it had been years. Again." Sören gave a wry smile before he finished his water.

"I forgive you," Dooku said.

Sören put the water down for a moment, stunned. That was huge, after all of the

bitterness of the last few months.

"I shan't lie," Dooku said, "it's still going to take time for me to fully get over what happened... and that may not be possible. As you know, I was badly hurt. But I am willing to try to keep moving forward and not hold it against you."

"That means the world to me," Sören said.

"You mean the world to me," Dooku said, his voice husky. "We could have lost each other, today. It puts things in perspective."

Sören held out his arms, and Dooku came over to hug him. Their lips brushed, a soft, sweet kiss - and then their lips parted, their tongues met, kissing deeply, fiercely, the passion of two people who had been through hell together, their bond fire forged, and had found their way back to each other. Their tongues slid, swirled, brushed, and Sören's cock rose to life, and Dooku groaned into the kiss, stroking Sören's face... letting his hands wander down Sören's chest and stomach, rubbing in slow circles, his touch making Sören shiver, cock throbbing.

Sören reached down to undo his jeans, and then a coherent thought pierced its way through the haze of lust: the memory of he, Dooku, and Anthony each drawing on the power of the Silmarils to kill Morgoth. How his own Silmaril shattered into three pieces, so now there were five Silmarils - two larger, two smaller.

Sören knew what he had to do. As they continued kissing, and Dooku slipped down Sören's jeans and boxer-briefs, freeing his hard cock, Sören used the Force to draw the pouch of Silmarils out of his pocket. He took it, opened the pouch, and held out one of the smaller pieces, putting it in Dooku's hand.

Dooku pulled back slightly, glanced at the small Silmaril shining in his hand, and then at Sören. "I don't..."

"For you," Sören said softly. "To keep. You deserve it. You earned it."

Dooku kissed Sören again, hard and hungry. Sören moaned and tugged at the hem of Dooku's shirt. Just as Dooku was taking his shirt off, revealing his hairy, muscular chest, the bedroom door opened and Anthony and Maglor walked in.

Anthony looked at Sören's hard cock, then smirked at Sören. "Well, I was going to check to see if you were up..."

"Get over here," Sören told them. "I have something for you."

"I bet," Anthony said; he and Maglor undressed on the way to the bed.

When Anthony and Maglor climbed onto the bed, Sören gave Anthony one of the other fragments from his Silmaril, and then he gave Maglor one of the two larger ones.

"We never know when we might be in a position to need to use them," Sören explained. He touched Maglor's face. "Perhaps you could use this to help you... rewrite the Song, or a new Song."

Maglor's jaw dropped and his eyes widened. Then he fell on Sören, kissing him hungrily, breathless, until Anthony pulled Maglor's hair, moving him back, and came in to claim his own kiss from Sören.

They put the Silmarils down on the bedtable - there would be time enough later. Right now this was all that mattered. They took turns kissing, caressing each other, and then Sören lay back as Dooku, Maglor and Anthony lavished love on him, kissing and licking him all over, teasing his nipples, his stomach, his thighs, hands stroking, exploring, everywhere they could touch. Sören arched to them, moaning, utterly lost in the sweetness of their mouths and hands on him, pleasuring and exciting him.

Sören wanted to love them right back. He spent some time with each of his men, kissing them, running his hands over them, before diving down to suck their cock, worshiping it - Maglor, then Anthony, then Dooku. Anthony and Dooku made out, stroking each other while Sören sucked Maglor, then as Sören sucked Anthony, Maglor and Dooku kissed and stroked, and at last Maglor and Anthony kissed and played with each other as Sören sucked Dooku. Sören got their precum flowing but didn't bring them off, wanting to save it.

They teased just a little longer, Sören and Dooku sixty-nining, sucking and rimming each other while Maglor and Anthony did, getting closer but not there yet, holding back their release. Sören and Maglor sucked and ate each other while Dooku and Anthony did the same, and then Sören and Anthony devoured each other, fucking each other's mouths, until they were just about to come. They pulled apart and shared a few deep, hot kisses before Sören communicated his need to the three of them across their bond.

When Sören was slicked up and ready, Dooku lay on his back and Sören climbed on, his back to Dooku's chest; they both moaned as Dooku slipped inside him, Dooku's arms tight around him when he was all the way in. Sören turned his face and they kissed as Dooku began to thrust, slowly, holding Sören. Maglor and Anthony watched Dooku's cock glide in and out of Sören, the sensual kissing, Dooku's hands sliding up and down Sören's body, giving him gooseflesh. At last Anthony came forward, getting between their legs, and guided the tip of his cock to Sören's opening. Sören gasped as he felt Anthony push in, tighter and tighter, that feeling like he was being split, full almost to discomfort...

...and then the sweet peace of it, that feeling of rightness, the three of them together this way. Sören sighed and took Anthony's hands in his. "Yes," he breathed.

Anthony matched Dooku's slow rhythm, and Maglor watched the push and pull of their cocks, stroking himself. Sören moaned as their cocks took turns rubbing that sweet spot inside him - electrified by the knowledge that they were teasing each other's cocks this way as well, making love to each other inside the tight silken heat of him. When they started to move faster, Maglor leaned in and took Sören's cock in his mouth, and the suctioning around his cock combined with the rubbing inside him in the most delicious way; Sören never wanted it to end.

After awhile Maglor was laying on his side to suck Sören, so Sören could suck Maglor's cock as well, thrilling to the depravity of giving himself completely to cock, two inside him, one in his mouth, hungry for it. Every now and again Maglor let Sören's cock slip from his mouth to lick it, and take a lick at Anthony's hip or thigh, give a little kiss before he got back to work. They kept the pace languid as long as they could, savoring the sensual pleasure, but the lust and sensation got to be too much and Sören and Maglor sucked hard, almost choking on each other, as Dooku and Anthony thrust faster, frenzied.

Sören and Maglor came together, Sören drinking down all Maglor had to give, and a few seconds later he felt Dooku and Anthony spurting inside him, cock creaming cock, and Sören throbbed again, his cock spending over Maglor's face.

As they lay there, recovering, Sören felt playful and began to lick his cum off Maglor's

face. Maglor kissed him to taste it, and one kiss led to another, getting them worked up again, hard cocks rubbing together.

Maglor grinned. "You licked me clean, I think I need to return the favor."

Maglor pushed Sören back against the pillows, and Anthony and Dooku watched as Maglor licked down Sören's chest, down his stomach, down Sören's shaft, and hooked Sören's legs over his shoulders as he lapped at Sören's passage, open and full of Dooku's and Anthony's cum. The double penetration made Sören's insides sensitized and Maglor's tongue felt exquisite as it lashed away. The utter debauchery of it and the intense pleasure made Sören writhe, panting, wanting to go again. Needing them, never enough.

Maglor teased and teased, reducing Sören to a quivering, whimpering wreck, begging incoherently. Every now and again Maglor pulled back to lick his lips, take a lick at Sören's cock, before plunging his tongue back inside, licking fast, licking slow. Anthony and Dooku joined in the teasing, one licking Sören's shaft slowly as the other leaned across him to lap and suckle his nipples. "Please," Sören cried out, going out of his mind with lust and sensation. "Oh, god, please, please..."

It was Maglor who took him, while Anthony and Dooku watched, kissing and stroking each other. Maglor went slow at first, kissing Sören, letting Sören taste the lingering notes of his lovers' seed, kissing and licking Sören's neck and throat, leaning in to kiss his hard, aching, swollen nipples, playing with one as he lapped and suckled the other. Soon enough Maglor was pounding him, jerking Sören's cock madly, the slap of their flesh rising above Sören's broken cries. Sören came hard, painting Maglor's gorgeous body, his face, and some of his hair with his seed, just before Anthony and Dooku sprayed their own over Sören. Marking him, claiming him. Theirs.

Sören laughed and cried - spent for now - and held out his arms, gathering them. A moment of bliss, of rest, of perfect peace. They belonged, and they had asserted that to the universe in a most glorious fashion - that no one who stood against them would prevail.

But as they put their clothes on, and began their journey to the main house - where the rest of their family, and some guests, were waiting - Sören wondered if they would be so fortunate a next time.

He was very sure there would be a next time, the only question was who would challenge them next.

They had a full house - besides Sören, Dooku, Anthony, Maglor, Ali, Elanora, Kate, Tori, Junior, Darren, and Medika, they now also had Böðvar, Brynhildur and Sigurð, Kenny, Findis, Finrod, Galadriel... and Baldur, Magni and Modi. Sören did a double-take at the sight of Sleipnir through the window, munching a bale of hay.

Things got even more surreal when, to feed everyone, party-size pizza was delivered. Galadriel had no idea what to make of pizza, and Finrod encouraged her. "It's good, I used to eat this when I was human," Finrod said.

"It looks like diseased lembas," Galadriel said.

Finrod's response was to pull off a piece of pepperoni and shove it in his sister's mouth. Galadriel chewed thoughtfully and decided the pizza was "acceptable", helping herself to a slice.

Despite many, many hugs from his kids and his own parents, and the feeling of relief that Morgoth was defeated and Kenny and Böðvar had been restored to them, Sören still couldn't shake the foreboding - and the concern that it would be sooner, rather than later, once the Dagorath had been felt, that they would be challenged.

Brynhildur finally broke the ice, knowing when her son was worried or upset. "Sören, what is it, *krútt mitt?*" she asked.

Sören frowned. "I don't want to get everyone down. We're supposed to be celebrating."

"But it's not really a celebration if you're making yourself keep quiet to go along and not bother everyone else," Brynhildur said; Sören noticed how heavily her English was accented and wondered if this was how he used to sound before his accent became more Australian than Icelandic. Brynhildur went on, "If you get whatever it is off your chest, you might feel better."

Sören took a deep breath. He looked out the window at Sleipnir again, then across at Baldur, Magni and Modi. This was actually not the first time he'd seen a Norse god eat pizza - Loki had eaten pizza in his living room back in 2020, the year everything went to shit - but it was still *strange*. "We've defeated most of the Asgardians, we've defeated Morgoth - who took out the Valar - and now I'm wondering who next. Who's going to see us as a threat and start trouble."

"That is a very legitimate concern," Baldur said.

Sören nodded, glad someone else got it. "And it's not like religion has done humanity any favors. People fight wars in the name of religion. People have used their religion to persecute and oppress others who aren't like them. People have used their religion to manipulate and abuse others. Humanity would be better off without religions, better off without gods -"

Dooku put up a hand. "I don't disagree," he said. "My mentor, Yodha, claimed he was an alien, and that the beings humans call 'gods' are mostly just advanced aliens using the Force to control and prey upon humanity. Maybe some of them aren't bad - " Dooku glanced over at Baldur, Magni and Modi. "But most are."

"My father got where he did by killing gods and godlike powers and... taking their energy," Baldur said.

"I know," Sigurð said. "I had visions."

"I am not like my father," Baldur said, "and I agree - people like my father, or the beings he killed to absorb their power, are tyrants. There might be some 'gods' who want to take care of humanity but they don't need worship, the same way a parent doesn't need its small child to praise everything they do and do favors for their parent while they're children."

Baldur got it, and Sören was relieved; he didn't want to sound genocidal against what was effectively an alien species or groups of alien species. "They'll come for us, eventually," Sören said, nodding slowly, "but if we deal with them we're not just protecting ourselves,

we're liberating humanity -"

Dooku put up his hand again. "Again, I don't disagree. But Sören..." Dooku shook his head. "We barely survived the fight against Morgoth. We had help..." He gave a nod of acknowledgment to Baldur, Magni and Modi, who had ridden in just in time, after the Orc surge triggered by Sauron's death. "But also, as you know, Morgoth had already killed all the Valar, save Námo, himself. If we'd had to take on the Valar by ourselves, I'm not sure we would have won the fight, as we would have been outnumbered by very strong forces. Then Morgoth would likely have taken advantage, if any of us survived, our numbers culled, and picked off the rest of us. I expect much the same if we attacked another pantheon, once we'd proven they were lording it over humanity."

"So what, we're supposed to just... sit on our asses and let them come for us?" Sören felt a flare of anger, even though he didn't want to sabotage the peace he'd won with Dooku. "You know that defense has the inherent disadvantage -"

"I do," Dooku said, ice and steel in his voice, "but to quote Sun Tzu, 'There has never been a protracted war from which a country has benefited.' Even if we get lucky and win the next war, or the next... it will take its toll on us. How many more wars do you need to fight, Fëanáro? How many more revolutions do you need to start?"

Sören exhaled and made a wounded animal noise before he tore into his pizza with his teeth like it had personally wronged him.

Anthony took a deep breath. "You're right," he said softly, glancing over at Dooku.

Sören glared. *Et tu, Cornelius?*

Anthony looked over at Sören. "And... so are you."

Across their Force bond, Sören felt Background Finarfin broadcasting *Not this shit again* and Sören stifled a laugh - he almost felt bad for Anthony. Almost.

Anthony leaned back in his chair and rubbed his face, looking very, very done.

Anthony took a moment to think and compose his words, then he put his plate of pizza down. "It's absolutely true that the 'gods', at least most of them, need to be dealt with, both before they can kill us off to save themselves - and before they make even more of a mess of things on this planet. But it's also absolutely true that we cannot spend the next several years, decades, fighting all the gods. Not to mention that once they're gone... we still have a basic problem, the need of humans to believe, to assign supernatural explanations to things. You take away the current gods, and more of the same will eventually arise, whether it be more advanced aliens... or Force-sensitive humans who can demonstrate power to those who don't know what they're looking at."

Sören knew Anthony was right, but they needed to *do* something. Before Sören could ask, Anthony continued. "Here's what I propose. We starve the gods. Those who truly have humanity's best interests at heart, who aren't feeding on humanity, who aren't expecting humans to 'serve' them the way you wouldn't expect a small child to be its parents' servant... they will survive the coming changes. The ones who are feeding, who see humanity as prey... will not."

"And how exactly are we supposed to do this?" Sören asked.

Anthony pursed his lips. Now he glanced over at the non-humans in the room - Maglor,

Findis, Finrod, Galadriel, Baldur, Magni, Modi... and then at those who were dead until some hours ago - Böðvar, Brynhildur, Sigurð, Kenny.

Anthony pinched the bridge of his nose and winced like he was in pain. "Back when I got recruited into the paranormal division of MI6 - and I'm using that word loosely because it was rather against my will - Letitia gave me a speech. Something that went like, 'Our purpose is to protect people like you, and protect the population from people *like* you. If someone like you gets captured by an enemy state and put to work for them, that could be bad. And the general populace can't handle the truth that there are people like you, or non-humans out there. It would create mass civil unrest.'"

Sören felt a frisson down his spine, and his heart began to beat just a little faster. Anthony swallowed hard and squared his shoulders. "I used to believe that until Thor impersonating 'Dag' came to us. The sort of clandestine, under-the-table, hush-hush nature of 'protecting the population' was also why, sorry Findarato, you were taken and held prisoner for years. I question, every single day, that if we didn't all have to hide who and what we are, would you have disappeared, would you have been treated like a lab rat." Anthony shook his head. "It's the kind of shit that keeps me up at night, staring at the ceiling, feeling like I'm doing something wrong by participating in the coverup."

Sören felt for him, aching for that weight on Anthony's conscience, the unspoken *I failed my son*.

"Just so you know," Finrod said, "I don't blame you. I don't hold you at fault for what happened to me, Adar."

"I appreciate it, but I'm still going to live with guilt for the rest of my life," Anthony said. He pursed his lips. "Guilt I need to atone for, somehow."

There was a long pause, then Anthony continued, "Not only knowing that keeping all of this secret contributed to why Dag was taken - and however many people, I doubt highly that Dag was the only one - but knowing there are religious leaders, political leaders, and other influential figures, exploiting their Force sensitivity to those who have no idea what's going on. How many of the old 'gods' were really just Force-sensitive grifters? How many of the old 'gods' weren't just aliens from outer space but were homegrown right here on Arda, from the Eldar, like Freyr who had once been Ingwion? If humanity learns the truth - that there are non-humans walking among us, that some humans have the ability to read minds, move things with their mind, do minor healing, a degree of mind control or strong persuasion and more... religion will either begin to die out, or at least evolve into healthier, scientifically-compatible forms where policy makers aren't listening to people teaching things like environmental destruction is OK, drill baby drill, because God is going to give them a new earth once he rains down hellfire on the gays and anyone who's not a Bible-thumping fundamentalist."

Before Sören could ask how this was all going to go down - though he had the feeling he already knew, the pit of his stomach rising - Findis cleared her throat.

"I'm sorry to interrupt," she said, "but there's... there's something else."

All eyes were on her now.

"Frankie chose not to resurrect, either as herself or as Lalwen. Maybe she might be willing to try Middle-Earth again, if the gods recede and the problems they've caused are fixed with logic and facts..." Findis smirked, as Sören recognized the meme. Then she sobered and went on, "But I doubt she will. At the very least, not for a long time, when the changes

have been stable. And we don't know how long the Halls of Mandos are going to hold, with Námo gone. What will happen to her, where she'll go. I agree humanity needs to cut the apron strings - it's more ethical to do good of one's own volition, than if one believes Invisible Sky Parent will punish them if they don't or reward them if they do - but that doesn't change the fact that consciousness doesn't exist in a vacuum. The dead need to go *somewhere*, even if humanity has moved on from believing in gods."

"Yeah." Sören sighed, his eyes tearing up at the thought of Frankie, alone as the Halls began to fade.

"I can try to restore the Halls," Baldur said, "but it's a big job. I need an assistant. Quite frankly, we need one to gather the souls and one to host them. I'd be better at collecting them, Sleipnir can ride anywhere, and we can make ourselves invisible so we don't scare anyone, the time of death is difficult enough for the dying and their families. But as far as hosting -"

"I can do it," Findis said. "I don't really belong in Valinor either, even with the Valar gone, and I can't live here without her. I'll help."

Sören reached into his jeans pocket, produced the pouch of Silmarils, and gave Findis the other large one - now he had the one, the small teardrop. But that was OK. "If the Silmarils can heal, if they can kill, if they can resurrect... they can create a new hall for the dead."

Findis took the Silmaril, her hand shaking. "Are you sure?"

"Tell Frankie I love her," Sören said. "Maybe I'll portal to visit now and again. Not too long, because I'm not sure how time distortion will affect things, but -"

Findis and Sören stood and hugged. Findis started to cry, and Sören did too. He would always miss Frankie, but this was better than the alternative. "You can meet your mum, sometime," Sören said to Junior, who got up and hugged Findis also.

Findis exhaled, and took a step back but lingered, her hands in Sören's - Sören could feel the Silmaril pulsing. He couldn't believe he was doing this, but it felt right.

"I don't mean to be rude and just cut out like this, but the longer I wait, the more risk there is of the Halls fading."

Sören hugged her again. "Go. We understand."

Findis and Baldur took off together on the back of Sleipnir, Findis waving until they jumped out of sight, across dimensions. Sören stayed at the window a moment longer, not able to believe what he was seeing - but there it was. Junior put a hand on his father's shoulder, understanding, wise beyond his years.

When Sören turned back to the group, Anthony was gone. Sören raised an eyebrow, but he heard sounds just down the hall and knew Anthony was up to... something. He sat back, ate pizza, and mulled everything over. He had goosebumps now, his hair standing on end - he knew things were about to get a lot weirder in short order. A lot more complicated.

As Anthony walked back in, Finrod finally spoke. "You know the Valar tried to keep Aman separate from the realm of humans, and I can't help but think now there was a reason for that. To keep the charade going, to control both Eldar and men."

Anthony nodded and sat down. "Yep."

"I propose that if you're trying to starve the gods, and give humanity the knowledge they need to put power back in their hands... we could help," Finrod said, looking at Galadriel, then back at Anthony. "I was human for awhile, AS YOU KNOW..." He smiled at Dooku. "I was even a scientist. I'm... detached from my memories, but I still have them. It's... hard to explain. Anyway, I remember just enough that I could help with bridging the gap between the paranormal and the scientific."

"That would be appreciated," Anthony said.

"But first," Galadriel said, "we have to see if there is even an Aman left that could be visited, or traveled from." Galadriel scowled. "I am sure that Morgoth did not turn *all* of our people into Orcs, at least some people probably hid from him, but if there are any survivors we need to round them up and put them at ease, and begin the process of restoring the damage done to our realm... and preparing for humans and Elves to reconnect."

Anthony gave her a hug. Then Galadriel narrowed her eyes at the laptop and the metal cube Anthony had carried in and sat down with, and pointed. "What is that?"

"This is a laptop computer, and that is a ten terabyte hard drive, Artanis," Anthony said.

Galadriel blinked. Of course she had no idea what Anthony was on about.

But Sören did - and so did Dooku, Ali, Darren and Maglor, gawking. "Are you..." Sören folded his arms. "Are you doing what I think you're doing?"

Anthony nodded as he hooked up the hard drive to the laptop. He raised his cup of Mountain Dew in a toast. "To Chelsea Manning and Edward Snowden," he said, and Sören watched as Wikileaks appeared on Anthony's laptop screen.

At midnight, South Australia time, Galadriel and Finrod went back to Valinor; it was agreed that Darren, Medika and Böðvar, and Brynhildur and Sigurð would stay on the sheep farm. If things went well, they'd see each other again, eventually.

With their bugout bags, and the cats in the carriers, Huan on a leash, Sören, Anthony, Maglor, Dooku, Ali, Kenny, Elanora, Kate, Tori and Junior jumped through the portal, from the fields of the ranch outside Ceduna, South Australia, to the street of the Swedish Migration Agency in Gothenburg, Sweden - the portal letting them through in broad daylight, with pedestrians and vehicle passengers to witness. One called out in Swedish, and another ran towards them, but they marched on ahead, up the steps of the building.

At the front desk, Anthony pulled out his identification. "My name's Cornelius Anthony Hewlett-Johnson, and in a few hours, everyone in the world will know who I am," he said. "I'm here to request asylum."

Chapter 25

After Anthony became a notorious whistleblower of MI6's paranormal division, dropping files on Wikileaks then requesting asylum in Sweden, where he could not be extradited to the UK, he and the other adults voluntarily submitted to a battery of medical exams and tests of uses of the Force, within humanitarian limits, to back up the information leaked.

Three weeks after Anthony's press conference, which was heavily secured - Anthony himself wore a Kevlar vest for the occasion - there was another event.

Reporters, scientists and diplomats gathered at Étretat, and watched as the sky shimmered and suddenly there were swan boats on the sea. A gentleman got out of one of the boats, with a mane of golden hair, in gold-and-green trimmed white robes, a pack on his back deliberately crafted to resemble a leaf. He swam, until he got to the "elephant trunk" of the Porte d'Aval arch. He came through the arch, not wading, but walking on the water.

Glowing, as if lit by his own sun.

He pulled a basket out of the leaf bag and tossed the bag aside to hold the basket, which contained a dozen loaves of bread with a golden-brown crust.

"I come in peace," Finrod Felagund said, "and with a gift for humankind. This is lembas. Try it for yourself. If more is made, and distributed, it will end world hunger."

Sören watched on television from the safe house in Sweden, as Finrod broke bread and shared it with volunteers. As Finrod had once been the first Elf to make contact with humanity, now he was re-establishing the ancient friendship of Elves and men. Sören's eyes teared up, and he and his family raised their glasses in salute.

It was the beginning of a new Age.

Chapter 26

September 2049

Gothenburg, Sweden to Frederikshavn, Denmark

"Almost there," Anthony said, putting a hand on Sören's arm.

They were taking a ferry across the Øresund - the Swedish government had imposed restrictions on them using any kind of portal - but Sören didn't mind so much, it was a relaxing ride with a nice view of the sea, and reminded Sören of when Finarfin would take Fëanor out on the ocean on a swan boat.

Within the last two months the UK had finally pardoned Anthony and dropped its charge of treason, but it had taken twelve years to do, during which time they'd built a life in Gothenburg, and now that they would no longer have to move from place to place to conceal their immortality, they were likely going to stay in Sweden permanently, or at least very long-term. Sweden wasn't exactly the same as Iceland, but it was close enough that it relieved some of Sören's homesickness.

Besides the restrictions on using the mini-portal or any of the portals around the world - the portals were "green" energy, but they were also deemed too dangerous to use - Sören was forbidden from making anyone else immortal who was not a member of his family, and he was forbidden from resurrecting anyone else. The United Nations had decided it was unfair to pass anything other than an "all or nothing" policy - if Sören was allowed to resurrect people's dead children and grandmothers, then he would also be compelled to resurrect criminals, and nobody wanted to be in the position of dealing with an immortal Emperor Trump. Sören's family was given an exemption because the courts had found it would be cruel to expect an immortal to watch their family members die.

However, humanity was starting to have a longer lifespan, now that fundamentalist beliefs were on their way out - religion wasn't completely dead yet, but secular humanism was widespread - and the Eldar were working with humans to terraform the Earth and reverse the ecological damage that had been done. Finrod Felagund was the ambassador to the UN from Valinor, and Galadriel was Valinor's first Prime Minister.

Ali and Kenny had elected to stay in Sweden to be with Maglor, who wanted to stay with Sören, Dooku, and Anthony. Maglor now had an idol show, like Simon Cowell once had, where he judged aspiring singers and bands. Anthony was a historian and a memoirist, who now had three bestsellers to his name. Dooku had a restaurant - Sören made "Swedish Chef" jokes and trolled him with börk-speak at least once a week. Sören had gone back to art and his paintings and pottery typically went for large amounts of money, most of which he gave back in charitable donations and start-up grants to LGBT youth. Ali and Kenny gave guided hiking tours through the wilds of Sweden.

Metallica and Megadeth continued to live in Australia. Metallica was a pianist with the Royal Melbourne Philharmonic, and Megadeth was a professor of physics at the University of Adelaide. Kate lived in Sydney with her girlfriend Zahida, where they had a lembas company, and Tori was living on a space station as a research scientist; Finrod was especially proud of them. Darren and his new wife Krysta maintained the sheep farm with Böðvar and Medika; Darren's son Brian had won gold in the 2036 Olympics. Brynhildur and Sigurð had gone back to Iceland, where they were schoolteachers.

Fëanor was never one to follow rules, so Baldur occasionally showed up to give Sören

and Junior a ride to see Frankie in what was now Helheim. It wasn't *technically* using a portal.

Today, Dooku was back in Gothenburg, watching the cats, and Sören and Anthony were going to Denmark to visit Junior and Elanora, who had gotten married and moved to Christiania five years ago. Even though Sören no longer had to conceal his identity, Junior still kept the name Søren Kierkegaard "for the lulz". Søren Jr. had an art studio where he taught classes, just like his father once had... and Søren also had a small pot farm. Elanora was now a famous singer-songwriter-multi-instrumentalist, known mononymously, heralded as "the female Prince".

They weren't just visiting Junior and Elanora... but Sören was visiting his first grandchild, born a week ago.

It still felt surreal to Sören. Junior was twenty-eight, Elanora was twenty-six... Sören himself would be sixty-five in November, Dooku was one hundred and one this December, and Anthony was sixty-nine.

"Nice," Sören said as the ferry pulled into the harbor. He wanted to turn cartwheels with excitement.

It was, unfortunately, still a bit of a ways from Fredrikshavn to Copenhagen. Even with new high-speed rail, it took an hour - though Sören conceded that was better than the six it would have taken in the old days - and Sören felt ready to jump out of his skin by the time they arrived in Copenhagen.

Junior and Elanora lived in a cheery yellow tiny house in Freetown Christiania - or mostly yellow; one side of the house had a mural in every color of the rainbow of peace signs, raised fists, flowers and trees... unicorns and dragons, and there were so many flowers and shrubs growing around the outside of the house that the color tended to be the last thing people noticed. When they got closer, Sören heard Snoop Dogg blasting - what Junior called "old people music" - but Junior opened the door before they could knock, and hugged them both warmly.

Elanora was resting, holding the baby. Sören and Anthony hugged her, and used the Force to pull up chairs; Junior brought in coffee and a tray of appetizers, including little plant-based hot dogs wrapped in croissants, with the Danish flag sticking out of each one on toothpicks. Junior and Elanora's cat, a grumpy-looking Himalayan named Fredrik, came over to sniff and allow himself to be petted.

"This is your grandchild, Kai," Junior said, taking the baby from Elanora so Sören could hold the baby.

Sören's eyes misted, remembering when Junior was that small. He wished Frankie was here to see this - but eventually Baldur would come to take Junior and Kai to Helheim and back. In the meantime... "He's beautiful. Uh, she. Uh..."

"Whatever they tell us when they get old enough," Junior said with a shrug. "Either, or, something else entirely."

Sören's sister was a trans woman, so Sören felt a bit sheepish, like he'd said something backwards - it seemed like Junior's generation had evolved and was increasingly not assigning a gender at birth, which Sören thought was probably a good thing - but Junior wasn't upset about his flub, at least.

"They're beautiful," Sören corrected himself, giving the baby's cheek a little kiss. "Hi," Sören whispered to the baby, rocking them, feeling a similar sort of parental hormones he'd felt when he held Junior for the first time. "Hi. Hey there." To Junior and Elanora he said, "God, they're so tiny."

"I know, I keep worrying I'm going to break them," Junior chuckled.

Sören took a deep breath and looked into his son's brown eyes. "I worry about you too, even though you're all grown up now. You know my offer still stands if you want to become immor -"

Junior nodded. "I know. I'm still thinking about it." Junior leaned back in his seat. "Even though it's not as complicated as what we expected it to be when I was growing up, I still want to wait awhile and see. I don't want to condemn myself to a world of suck."

"I don't blame you." As much as the world seemed to be on the right path now, it had only been a comparatively short time, not enough time for it to feel really safe just yet.

Kai started to cry, and Junior passed the baby back to Elanora, who pushed her robe aside and began nursing the baby. Sören got up to give her some privacy - breastfeeding wasn't a big deal but it still felt weird - and Junior took the opportunity to show them his latest paintings, and how well some of his pot plants were doing, that he'd named.

As they walked out to the back of the house to admire the little garden, Huginn landed on Anthony's head and Muninn swooped onto Sören's shoulder. Muninn dropped something out of his beak - a little bag with a USB card inside.

The technology of a couple decades ago was mostly obsolete now, but Junior liked keeping old laptops and tablets around for nostalgia's sake, and they put the card in the USB port of one of those old laptops now. The card held a gallery of photos - of another version of Sören with Anthony, Dooku, and Maglor. Happy together, living in a cottage in what appeared to be the Isle of Skye, with cats. There was a .TXT file with a note attached that said, simply, "*Púsund þakkir*. Anthony and I have been clean for five years."

Sören broke down crying, though he tried to keep it down for the baby's sake. He sometimes wondered how the strung-out versions of he and Anthony that he'd sent to rehab were doing, and now he knew. He hoped the version of himself that had been rescued from Justin Roberts and sent to Étretat was OK too - that he, Anthony, Maglor and Nicholas had found peace there. Something told him they had.

Then Sören's relief and joy that the rescue mission had paid off, was chased by an ugly fear. In this world, Odin was gone, the Valar and Morgoth were gone, other gods were fading. Sören wondered about the threat to other versions of himself and his family... if they would be so fortunate, or meet their own Doom.

Anthony gave Sören a stern look, sensing that fear across their bond. "Don't even think about it."

Sören sighed. "No, of course not." He patted Anthony reassuringly. But when Elanora was ready for him to hold Kai again, Sören couldn't keep from wondering how their counterparts would fare... or, for that matter, if Kai's future would be one of peace, or if perhaps another world's Morgoth and Sauron would cross into this world to cause trouble.

Don't, Anthony spoke into his mind.

Sören nodded and began to gently rock the baby. It was going to take a lot to keep him from breaking the law and portaling out to go off on another multiverse journey, dragging Anthony and Dooku with him this time, finishing what he started - but the baby was a good anchor, who deserved to be spoiled by all their grandparents and kin, to have the happiness Sören did not have as a child, and that Sören had tried to give Junior but he had still been a child of war, too old for his years. Hopefully by the time Kai got old enough, Sören's urge to go on another jaunt and fix things would lessen, and he would be more invested in Kai's children and grandchildren until Sören's descendants were as numerous as the trees.

Hopefully.

Unless Kai was interested in being his accomplice. Then all bets were off.

Sören booped the baby's nose and smiled.

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