

Northern Lights: One-Shots

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Northern Lights: One-Shots

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

Summary

These are the 11 one-shots that comprise [Northern Lights: Appendices on Ao3](#), put together in a single multichapter work for ease of archival. Stories range from G/T rating [General/Teen] to Explicit.

Notes

Due to the extremely fraught history surrounding the Northern Lights universe - with regards to the communication breakdown with two collaborators, the way the works have been misrepresented, and subsequent targeted harassment that has been going on since 2020 - all but one of the works in this universe are archive-locked on both Ao3 and Squidgeworld. I worked hard enough on this universe [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.

Wind Of Change

Chapter Summary

November 1989, as the Berlin Wall comes down, a moment in the lives of one man, one Elf, and one boy.

November 1989

Akureyri, Iceland

"So this is goodbye." Birgitta Jónsdóttir swallowed hard against the lump in her throat, her eyes burning with unshed tears.

The tears were reflected in the eyes of her sister Brynhildur, three years her senior. Brynhildur was twenty-nine now, and she had lost her husband, Sigurð Tollason, three years earlier. The official coroner's report had been a stroke, but Brynhildur, Gitta, and their younger brother Böðvar knew better. They all had the gift, and Sigurð did as well. And for the last five years, they had all been hunted. For Gitta and Böðvar, it had just been in their dreams. But for Brynhildur and Sigurð, they were being visited by supernatural entities on occasion, and one had finally killed Sigurð.

Gitta thought back to their conversation almost a month ago.

"It's only a matter of time before they come for you," Brynhildur warned them. "There's something about the land here... draws them. You need to leave Iceland, both of you."

Böðvar had opted to go across the world, to Australia, and he'd left for Sydney just before Halloween. Gitta had finally opted on Scotland.

"Are you quite sure you won't come with me?" Gitta folded her arms. "Or at least let me take the children?"

"I can fight them," Brynhildur said. "I can protect them. You'd just be putting yourself in more danger."

Gitta wasn't so sure of that. Brynhildur hugged her then, holding her tight, as if to let her feel the strength in her arms. "See, I can crush a bear," Brynhildur chuckled.

Then Brynhildur called to her children, who had been playing in the living room. "Magnús, Dagnýr, Sören, come say goodbye to your aunt Gitta."

The three shuffled in. Dagnýr hugged her first, followed by Magnús, and then finally little Sören, who came forth slowly, shyly, his dark eyes wide and solemn. Gitta could feel the sadness in him more strongly than the other two, as if he could sense something was very, very wrong, that despite his mother and aunt's attempts at keeping the news of the move on the up-and-up, Sören knew perfectly damn well it was an emergency. For a four-year-old he was much too serious - as one would expect, having already lost his father. Seeing his mother sad all the time. He was also an exceptionally smart boy, with an

advanced level of reading and vocabulary for his age, he even knew a little English. But even expected, it was heartbreaking. He was quiet, withdrawn.

He had his hands behind his back, and when Gitta opened her arms for a hug, Sören opened his arms to reveal a sheet of paper in his hands. Gitta took it and saw, in brightly colored crayon, a drawing of a sheep wearing a kilt.

"Awwwww, thank you, Sören!" She tousled his unruly mop of curls and bent to kiss the top of his head. "You're such a dear boy."

"You like it?" His small voice sounded like he was worried she wouldn't.

"I love it. I'm going to hang it up as soon as I get to Scotland."

A little mischievous smile. "Hi going to hang it up as soon as -"

"My *god*, Sören." Brynhildur tweaked his nose, and Sören's smile became a grin. It was so rare to see him joke that Gitta found it much funnier than she normally would have.

"I like making you laugh," Sören said to Gitta. "You're so sad."

The tears threatened to come now; Gitta blinked them back. Realizing she probably wasn't going to see much of Sören growing into a young man was hitting her hard. "So are you, little one."

"I know. But it makes me happy when I can make other people happy."

Gitta and Brynhildur both hugged him then, and Magnús and Dagnýr stopped play-fighting for a moment to come over and join in the hug.

"Can we come visit you?" Dagnýr asked finally, his eyes hopeful.

"I'd like that," Gitta said, patting him.

"Maybe," Brynhildur said, giving Gitta a nervous glance. *Not until they stop coming for the children. Then I'm just putting you in danger.*

I doubt that.

You weren't there when Sigurð died.

It felt like the temperature in the room was rising. There was a flash of images across Gitta's mind's eye, too quick, but in the end she saw the shadow demons swarming him, his last breath. She had to close her eyes, shivering despite the heat.

They drove to the airport, where Gitta would be taking a flight to Reykjavik, and then to Edinburgh, to start her life anew. Hugged for the last time, and then Gitta turned, not looking back, because she knew if she looked back she'd run, insisting to stay, or insisting they come with her. And she wasn't going to fight her sister on this, much as she wanted to. Brynhildur was *terrified*, and this was the only way she could take back some semblance of control.

And yet, as she flew across the Atlantic Ocean, looking down at the choppy waters from her window seat, she knew she would never see her sister again.

—

London, England

Forty-year-old Ion Nicolae Dooku frowned at the calendar as he and a few of his other colleagues gathered around the water cooler. "I wonder where Tony is," Dooku mused aloud, Tony being a fellow defense barrister and the only other one of them who seemed to have a moral compass. Dooku admired the older man, respected their shared sense of justice, the belief that everyone had the right to a fair trial, that it was better to defend one hundred guilty people than let one wrong innocent person be unlawfully convicted, and to be able to set an example to their clients, who were often on the wrong side of the law due to classism, helping them make connections to get on the right path.

Tony had given some hints that he'd admired him in a non-professional sense. Dooku wasn't blind, and he'd known for some time that he played for the home team, but he didn't do anything about it. He couldn't. It would be career suicide, even if Tony wasn't a colleague. He couldn't risk being outed. So he was never anything more than cordially professional. No dating. No sex.

Dooku was never anything more than cordially professional with anyone, and at nearly forty-one it was wearing on him, but he was married to his job. This was how it had to be.

Sure enough, what followed next reinforced why his life was the way it was. "You didn't hear?" William Hughes said, raising an eyebrow.

"Hear... what."

"He's in hospital, dying of AIDS." William snorted into his glass of water. "Fucking queer. Glad I won't have to share an office with *that* anymore."

Dooku fought the urge to tell William that he shouldn't be gleeful at anyone's death, least of all from AIDS, which was a horrible way to die. But he knew if he said anything, he would start to be looked upon with suspicion, and he couldn't afford that. So he said nothing, and felt disgusted by it.

When he came home that evening, alone as usual, he drank, which was not usual. He thought of how he'd dodged that bullet altogether by ignoring Tony's interest, he thought of how he worked with a bunch of bigots, he thought bitterly that the world he lived in would rather condemn people to death for their sexual orientation rather than work on finding a cure for AIDS, and he was perhaps better off alone if humanity was like this.

I need to go on vacation. Dooku pinched the bridge of his nose. His forty-first birthday was coming up in December. He would have some paid leave time. He looked at some travel brochures that he'd taken when he'd entertained the idea over the summer, and of course, hadn't. The Bahamas. Australia. France. West Germany. Which was, as he watched the BBC news with his whisky, about to become just Germany. The Wall was falling.

His parents, dead for some time now, who had come to the UK from Romania after the tyranny of the Nazis, not wanting to live under the new tyranny of communism, would have rejoiced if they could see this now, the Iron Curtain almost a thing of the past.

They would not rejoice to know that he was still unmarried, with no heir, a deeply

closeted, celibate homosexual. But they had never rejoiced in his existence. He told everyone he favored being called by his surname because his first name, Ion, was the name of his Nazi collaborator uncle (though he'd been named for his great-grandfather, also), but the truth was he was "you" or "it" to his parents unless he was going to the woodshed, then they used his given name.

I suppose that's why I endure. I'm used to not being loved.

Dooku raised a glass to the screen, to couples kissing, celebrating wildly in West Berlin. "At least someone's happy."

—

West Berlin, West Germany

Marcus Lauer was with the crowd singing songs, waving their lighters as people from East Berlin scaled the Wall.

Marcus Lauer's name was not actually Marcus Lauer, and it was not the first time he had seen the end of a government regime, the end of an era. It was not even the tenth or the twentieth time.

People were actually flying balloons now, and Maglor heard himself joining in with

*Hast du etwas Zeit für mich?
Dann singe ich ein Lied für dich
Von neunundneunzig Luftballons
Auf ihrem Weg zum Horizont
Denkst du vielleicht grad an mich?
Dann singe ich ein Lied für dich
Von neunundneunzig Luftballons
Und dass sowas von sowas kommt*

*Neunundneunzig Luftballons
Auf ihrem Weg zum Horizont
Hielt man für Ufos aus dem All
Darum schickte ein General
'ne Fliegerstaffel hinterher
Alarm zu geben, wenn's so wär
Dabei war'n dort am Horizont
Nur neunundneunzig Luftballons*

There was beer going around - of course there was. Someone was giving him free beer. Maglor was more of a wine drinker, but he accepted; when in Germany, do as the Germans do. "*Danke.*"

And it seemed like a good time to drink. Most people were drinking to celebrate, and Maglor wasn't unhappy about the Wall falling... he was unhappy about living through yet another profound moment in history, a painful reminder that more time had passed since the death of his family, than the time he had spent with them while living.

He felt very, very, very old. And of course, no one around could know that. He had to pretend to be like everyone else.

The November night was cold, and the alcohol was warming, but there was a chill in his bones, like the fire inside him was starting to die. He was getting very tired of this life.

He looked up at the stars, a silent prayer to his family... those he kept alive in the Song, making himself go on for that.

Father, Uncle, I wish you were here. I could endure this, if you were. You'd like Berlin. You would especially like Berlin, Father. So many artists.

He closed his eyes.

—

Even though the November night was cold, Dooku needed some air, and a few moments of quiet contemplation, so he stood out in his small, picket-fenced yard, looking up into the night sky, though the light pollution in London was such that he couldn't see so many stars.

I wish I were of an age where I could wish for things and not feel bloody stupid about it.

He sighed. He knew what his deepest wish was, the one he could not name. But he had no hope of ever finding that.

—

Dagnýr liked to go out and wave goodnight to the stars before bed, and Sören would go with his twin brother. They would often just stand or sit there for a few minutes, mesmerized, no matter how many times they'd seen the sky, a sea of stars in an area where there wasn't much light pollution.

"I wonder if aunt Gitta is looking at it too," Sören said.

"She's probably in bed now. Scotland's in another time zone," Dagnýr said matter-of-factly.

For all the people who said Sören was smart for his age, he felt positively *dumb* next to his twin. He looked down at his little boots in the snow. "I guess."

"Hey look, a shooting star!" Dagnýr pointed. "Wow, I wonder if it's a spaceship."

"Maybe one of the gods is farting." Sören made a fart noise.

Dagnýr gave him *a look*. "Sören, that isn't scientific."

"No, but it's funny." Sören made another fart noise.

"You know the ancient Greeks and Romans thought the planets were gods?"

"Is that why they're called gas giants?"

Dagnýr facepalmed.

"Come on, make a wish." Sören tugged on Dagnýr's sleeve. "We're gonna be five soon! Wish for something good for our birthday!"

"Why not dream big? Why not for when we're *thirty-five*?"

Sören's mouth made a tiny *o*. "Oh my god, Dag, that's *old*."

"When I'm thirty-five, I wanna be a scientist," Dagnýr said, "and teach people about space, and... stuff."

"When I'm thirty-five, I wanna be. Uh." Sören scratched his head. Then he grinned, thinking of just what would annoy his brother. "I wanna be a god, so I can fart on mean people who do bad things." He made another fart noise.

"Bloody *hell*, Sören."

"Dagnýr, LANGUAGE!" Brynhildur called from the doorstep. "Now come inside, it's cold out."

"Race you," Sören said, and he and Dagnýr ran to the door, with Dagnýr beating him, Sören wheezing a little when he walked in.

"You OK?" Dagnýr gave him a concerned look and put an arm around him; Sören nodded.

"Bedtime now." Brynhildur ushered them into their room, where the covers were already turned down.

Once they were tucked in, she began to sing, in English.

*There's a lady who's sure
All that glitters is gold
And she's buying a stairway to heaven
When she gets there she knows
If the stores are all closed
With a word she can get what she came for
Oh oh oh oh and she's buying a stairway to heaven*

Far Away, So Close

Chapter Summary

In London in summer 2001, sixteen-year-old Dagnýr Sigurðsson gets lost and needs directions, getting help from a young officer in the Royal Navy. What neither of them know is that there is a reason for the officer being protective towards him, that dates back to a past life.

August 2001

London, England

Instead of going back to Iceland for the summer and dealing with his aunt Katrín and uncle Einar, sixteen-year-old Dagnýr Sigurðsson was electing to do a tour of different parts of England - the summer tour funded by his patron, who had elected to stay anonymous. His days in London were winding down - he'd be returning to Oxbridge for another year at Oxford in less than a week. He'd been reserving all the "typical tourist stuff" in London as the grand finale. Today it was Big Ben.

Dagnýr had a lot of anxiety in crowds - and London was *so big* compared to tiny Akureyri, where he grew up - and Big Ben was flooded with tourists who had rather the same idea he did, wanting to see the famous landmark on a nice, warm sunny day like today. A breeze was keeping the day from being too hot. Dagnýr wore a pair of khaki cargo shorts and a green-and-gold hibiscus-flowered Hawaiian shirt - which probably gave the impression he was from America rather than Iceland - and aviator sunglasses. The cowlick in his short dark hair would not be tamed no matter how much gel he put in his hair, but at least when he put his sunglasses on top of his head, the cowlick was hidden better. He had his camera around his neck and a satchel over one arm.

After Dagnýr had gotten his fill, taking pictures that he'd mail back home to Sören, Ari, and Magnús - *she wants to be called Margrét*, he reminded himself - he made his way through the crowd to check the piece of paper where he'd carefully written down directions to the Doubletree Hotel where he was staying.

As the wind kicked up a little stronger, he was promptly bumped into by a stranger, the jostle hard enough that he let go of the paper, which blew into the wind. "*Ó skít!*" Dagnýr chased after it, but then a group of tourists got in his way and he saw the paper blow away and away.

If there hadn't been so many people around, Dagnýr would have simply held his hand out and reached with his mind, pulling the paper back towards him. But he'd learned he couldn't do that, not without causing a scene. So the paper was lost, and with it his directions. With another cry of "*Skít!*" Dagnýr frantically tried to recall the information, but he had *so* much swimming around in his head, and the anxiety of the swarming crowds was getting to him.

I need to ask for directions. Surely someone will help me.

Dagnýr swallowed hard. People were scary. He knew logically he might not have his head

bitten off if he asked a stranger, but he was still nervous anyway, and some of his experiences throughout his summer travels had informed his caution with strangers, people wary of foreigners and thinking a teenage boy by himself was automatically a hoodlum. He decided to scout to see if anyone looked "nice", like a grandmother type, though he'd found earlier into his stay in London that little old ladies could be nasty too.

Between Big Ben and St. Stephen's Tavern, Dagnýr's eyes settled on a young-looking man - not older than thirty-five, if he had to guess - with warm golden-white hair down to his waist, wearing dark sunglasses and a large ring on his forefinger - an interesting but somewhat creepy design, a spider set with what appeared to be a fire opal. He was tall with a slim build, wearing a long black tunic embroidered with scarlet roses, and black leather pants... and he was feeding pigeons. The man was smiling and talking affectionately to the pigeons. *Yes, he looks safe.* There was something unsettling about him, but how bad could he be if he was feeding pigeons?

Dagnýr made a beeline. "Hi," he said.

"Hello," the man said. He had a very pleasant voice that reminded Dagnýr of a hearth fire in winter for some reason.

"Nice pigeons," Dagnýr said, and then he realized the pigeons were wild and didn't belong to him like a pet or anything, felt dumb, and facepalmed. "Er, sorry. I'm a bit lost and I'm nervous."

"Oh. It's OK."

Out of the corner of his eye Dagnýr saw a small group of men walking out of St. Stephen's Tavern. They were all wearing uniforms that Dagnýr recognized as Royal Navy, having encountered a few officers since starting Oxford. His eyes met the eyes of one of them, green eyes behind wire-rimmed glasses like the ones Dagnýr would be wearing if he didn't have shades today, tall, pale, lean and broad-shouldered, short black hair, classically handsome in kind of a bland way. Dagnýr refocused his attention on the man with the long silver ponytail feeding pigeons.

"Can... can you help me? I wrote down directions and a wind blow them. Blew. *Blew.*" Dagnýr gave an apologetic smile. "I'm not English, sorry."

"It's fine," the man said.

Dagnýr, who had become quite self-conscious about his accent his last two years in England, was soothed by the gentle voice. The officer he'd glanced at was talking to his friends, saying "I'll meet you in a bit," and now approaching.

"Where are you trying to go?" the long-haired man asked.

"The Doubletree Hotel," Dagnýr said. "I'm walking there -"

"Oh, that's not far, and I'm parked nearby. I can give you a ride."

"That's very nice of you," Dagnýr said, nodding.

"Here, follow me," the man said, and immediately, the officer was in their path.

"Good afternoon," the officer said. He gave the long-haired man a dirty look. Then he looked at Dagnýr. "Pardon me, I couldn't help but overhear you needed directions to the

Doubletree?"

"It's really no trouble to drive him," the man said.

"I'm sure." The officer narrowed his eyes. Then he gave Dagnýr a stern look. "I'll give you directions if you'd rather walk there. It's a lovely day, too nice not to walk."

"Jæja..." Dagnýr shifted his weight from one foot to the other. "He offered..."

Somehow, the officer had walked him a few feet away from the long-haired man. He began to speak directions aloud. "OK, you want to turn right towards Parliament Square -"

"Ah... I had directions written down because I forget," Dagnýr said. He had ADHD and writing things down was a necessary survival skill, not that he wanted to disclose all of that to a total stranger.

"Right." The officer reached into his pocket and pulled out a small notebook and a pen. "I'll write them down twice, so if they blow away again, they're unlikely to blow away a third time, yeah?" He gave Dagnýr a friendly smile.

"Jæja." Dagnýr smiled back, nodding, and then he wondered how the officer had known they'd blown away, since he hadn't heard that part of the exchange, had he? A frisson went down Dagnýr's spine, wondering if the officer was *like him*.

The long-haired man was watching them a few feet away - Dagnýr could *feel* the eyes watching them - and the officer kept looking back over his shoulder, giving the pigeon-feeder wary looks as he jotted the directions down. Finally the officer said, "You know what, fuck it, I'll walk you there myself. It's not far."

"Are you sure? I don't want to be any trouble -"

"No. You're coming with me." The officer gestured, and like that Dagnýr was following him, and then walking alongside him. The officer was only a couple inches taller but had a long, powerful stride and Dagnýr felt like he had to rush to keep up.

"*Takk*, I really appreciate it," Dagnýr said, holding out his hand. "I'm Dag."

The officer took it, his grip strong, firm. "I'm Anthony." Then he gave Dagnýr a disapproving look. "Where are your parents?"

Dagnýr bristled. "Dead."

Anthony cringed. "Where are your guardians, then?"

"I'm legally emancipated," Dagnýr said, carefully enunciating. At Anthony's surprise, he said, "I go to Oxford."

"*How* old are you?" Anthony looked incredulous.

"Sixteen -"

"You look younger." Anthony frowned.

Dagnýr bristled again. "I'll be seventeen in November."

"You're also... how are you sixteen and already attending Oxford?"

"I got in at fourteen. I, ah. Was ahead of my class. I'm going to be a scientist. I like physics."

"Well, good on you," Anthony said, nodding. "I just graduated Cambridge. I took languages. It'll help for a career in intelligence."

"Is that why you ask so many questions? You'd make a good lawyer too, asking all these questions."

Anthony laughed softly. "And you're asking me about asking questions."

Dagnýr made a face.

Anthony patted his shoulder. Then he asked, "*Är du från Sverige? Jag talar svenska om det är lättare för dig.*"

Dagnýr replied in Danish, his third language. "*Ikke fra Sverige, nej, men det er rart af dig at tilbyde. Jeg er faktisk fra Island.*"

"Iceland? That's a small country, isn't it? And very safe."

"Safe enough." Dagnýr shuddered, thinking about the violence of his aunt and uncle that he'd escaped.

"Well, let me give you a piece of advice, Dag," Anthony said. "Don't get in cars with strangers you've known for all of thirty seconds."

Dagnýr bristled again. "What are you, my father?" And then, a moment of levity. "You look like you could be my father, anyway."

Anthony chuckled. "I'm only twenty-one."

"That man back there seemed all right," Dagnýr said.

"Maybe he was. Maybe he wasn't. My gut feeling told me something was a little off. I don't know what." Anthony shrugged. "I just know that you ought to be more careful."

The hotel really wasn't far - Dagnýr felt like an idiot for needing help getting there, and as if Anthony knew what Dagnýr was thinking, he said, "Don't feel too bad, mate. London is an easy city to get lost in."

"Well, *takk* again for walking me here and, you know, protecting me from Mr. Stranger Danger."

Anthony laughed. "Duty called."

"Ah... you want to join me for dinner? I'll buy for you, since you helped."

"No, thank you. I have to be on my way, I'm meeting some people -"

"You left them to come help me?"

"I did, but they'll understand."

Dagnýr still felt bad. "I'd still like to repay you for your kindness. I... ah..." He thought for a moment. "Can you get care packages in the service? I'll send you one."

Anthony wrote down some contact info before he left. Dagnýr carefully tucked the slip of paper with a mailing address for one Anthony Hewlett-Johnson into his satchel.

—

9/11 happened weeks later, and after the attack in New York City, British security forces were placed on maximum alert, with Tony Blair pledging that the United Kingdom would stand alongside the United States. Dagnýr thought about his sort-of friend in the Royal Navy, knowing the likelihood of him being deployed was very high, and he decided to send the care package sooner than later, a collection of sweets from Iceland that he had imported and a handsome edition of the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy, since he thought someone who'd taken languages would probably like reading in their spare time and an allegory about another major global conflict might be a nice message of hope.

He never heard back from Anthony, and he wondered if Anthony thought he was a pest, or perhaps worse, if something had happened.

Dagnýr got busy enough with his studies at Oxford to mostly forget about it. Mostly. Years later, during his stint at NASA, he met people who'd been in the US Air Force and Navy, and every time he met an officer he'd wonder if Anthony had made it through the Gulf War, but didn't have the heart to try to look him up on Facebook or something else, in case he hadn't.

The Sound Of Sinners

Chapter Summary

Sören and Frankie meet in London in 2015, and Frankie doesn't like Sören's boyfriend Justin.

Trigger warning for violence (Justin's abuse of Sören), mentioned/referenced (not detailed) rape, and Justin making gross comments about Frankie's weight.

"You love Findis the way I love Fëanáro." There was warmth in the deep velvet voice, no judgment.

Írimë swallowed hard, and nodded, meeting her brother's silver-blue eyes.

"You know I understand." Fingolfin took her hand, and squeezed. He sighed, then. "I know there has been no love lost between you and Fëanáro. But we cannot afford to be at war with each other, when the Valar themselves stand against us. And I think if you came to him, and told him about Findis... it would be a place to start from."

"He and I have been almost strangers all this time. I fear even that will not help."

"If I say it will work, it will work. You forget how well I know him. How deeply."

"I'm sure it's very deep," Írimë said, with a roll of her eyes. But then she was serious once more. "I would need you to go to him... arrange a meeting..."

"I can do that." Fingolfin nodded.

Some days later, Fingolfin and Fëanor approached Írimë together. Fëanor sat, and looked at his half-sister with something other than scorn for the first time.

"I am with Findis as you are with Fingolfin, and Finarfin," Írimë said. "The Valar would call this sin. They would judge us for it."

"They *do* judge us for it," Fëanor said.

"Fingolfin told me about... the Silmarils." Írimë's jaw set. "They have a piece of your soul."

"I put a drop of myself into all I create. But these, most especially. The Valar are not worthy to have them, when they have forsaken us... when they would punish us for being what we are."

"I will offer my sword and my shield." Írimë held out her hand. "I will offer my heart, if you would embrace me as a sister."

Fëanor took her hand, and pulled her into his arms. He planted a kiss into her short-cropped dark hair. "We stand together, dear sister. Ever shall we defend each other."

—

2015

Greenwich, London, England

Mary Frances O'Riordan, called Frankie by most who knew her, was turning twenty on this balmy early August day. She didn't have many friends, and she was between girlfriends. But she would take herself on a date.

Frankie decided on going to a club in London, to a combination art show and punk concert. She liked that sort of thing. She went punk as a teenager - she was all of five feet tall, on the slightly chubby side, had been a ginger before sporting her pink mohawk. She wasn't conventionally attractive, and growing up in council housing she didn't have money for the fashionable clothes the other girls were wearing. Punk let her look *interesting* - she could wear things from thrift shops and things she'd patched together from bits and pieces. When she was old enough to get a job and have some money of her own, she worked on a set of piercings and tattoos. She had flowered vines on her legs, thighs, and arms that led out to a Tree of Life on her back, a nod to her Celtic heritage, and above the tree was a set of stars, including a large flaming star on the back of her neck. She had gauges in her ears and several different sets of piercings in her ears, one of which held a chain attached to a ring in her left nostril. She had her right eyebrow pierced, had her nipples pierced, her navel, and a clit ring.

Beyond the aesthetics of it, punk also gave her an outlet for the anger she carried around. She never knew her father - she had her mother's surname, an alcoholic who'd left Belfast during the Troubles, along with her mother's sister, but her aunt didn't drink anymore, had been sober for some time. She had an uncle, dead of the Troubles.

Frankie wanted to feel sorry for her mother, but it was hard to do when her mother was a mean drunk. Meanest of all when she'd caught Frankie with a girl, and read her the riot act about sin and Hell, conveniently forgetting that drunkenness was also a sin. Frankie's mother forced her to her knees and beat her with a Bible. It wasn't the first time Frankie's mother had been like this, but it was the worst time, ending with telling her to get out.

Frankie's own aunt was a lesbian - she and Frankie's mother had stopped talking not long after coming to England together - and Frankie called her, in tears. Since that time she'd been living in the flat above the coffee shop her aunt Siobhan owned, simply called It's A Coffee House, where she worked as assistant manager, just enough to make ends meet. Maybe buy some vinyl records now and again.

Frankie did a twirl in the mirror - she was wearing a shirt that was the album cover of London Calling by The Clash, over red plaid pants, and her usual steel-toed Doc Martens boots. She had assorted rings on her fingers, all silver, spiked leather bracelets on both wrists, and some silver bangles on both arms. Around her neck was a spiked leather dog collar, and a thick silver rope chain. Her grey-blue eyes were usually behind glasses, with square black frames, but she'd left the glasses off today, and added a touch of mascara. She'd re-dyed her mohawk yesterday, so it was bright pink. She added some blood-red lipstick, and decided she was good to go, heading out to take the Tube.

The club was crowded, and crowds made her a bit nervous, but there was an energy in the air that was infectious, and this was why she went to these kinds of events. There was something about dancing at a punk show that made her feel alive, made her blood sing, like she was some sort of warrior queen preparing for battle, training to tribal drums. The pit could get a bit rough, but it was all in good fun, outsider weirdos among their kind.

She was getting into it, like she always did. And then she felt a hand groping her ass.

She whirled around, white-hot fury. "EXCUSE?"

A dirty-looking guy who had a foot on her, with a blue mohawk and bad teeth, wearing leather and a lot of chains, leered. "Just admiring the art at the art show," he said.

Frankie glared. "I'm not interested. Don't touch me again."

"Aw, what's the matter, sweetie?" He reached out and grabbed one of her tits. "I could show you a good time."

"You heard her. Leave her alone," came a voice behind him, soft but powerful, deep, with a strange but pleasant accent.

"Eh, back off, mate, this bint is mine." The creep moved closer, with a lewd wink.

Frankie gave him a hard shove. "I said piss off, wanker."

The creep staggered back, and for a minute Frankie thought he was going to take the hint and go away, but then he walked back towards her - clearly not intimidated, since he towered over her and all. "A little fight in you." He grinned. "Feisty. I like that." He reached out towards Frankie's crotch.

Just before he could grab, his arm was grabbed, and he was thrown down to the floor. A man standing six feet or so, with longish curly dark hair, a beard and mustache, wearing a Joy Division shirt and skinny jeans, wiry build, started kicking the shit out of him with his own set of Doc Martens. He had a feral look in his dark eyes, as if watching her get almost molested had *really* set him off. "She said *leave her alone*, so fucking leave her alone, you fucking asshole!" the man yelled, and when the creep looked over his shoulder, sneering, he got backhanded.

The man looked at Frankie. "Are you all right?"

"Yeh. Ta." She nodded.

The creep wasn't done. He shoved her white knight, and came at him with his fists. The two got into an all-out brawl. The creep was all out for vengeance now, but the more he came at the man, the harder he fought back, almost like the pain was feeding his wrath - Frankie thought of Viking berserkers, watching him, half-expecting him to take his shirt off. By the time the club security rushed in to break it up, the man had knocked out one of the creep's teeth and broken his nose. The club wasn't going to call the police, but the show was over, and the man was being escorted out by bouncers, swearing all the while in a foreign language over his shoulder, giving the finger and the V, still angry as hell.

Frankie was getting some dirty looks, as if she had somehow caused the show to be over prematurely all by herself, and she stepped out as quietly as she could. She saw the man walking outside the club, and she put her fingers in her mouth and whistled. "Ey! You!" she yelled.

The man stopped, and turned around. Frankie waved and gave a shy smile.

He paused in his tracks, and Frankie ran up to him. "Uh, thanks," she said.

"No need to thank me. I'm just doing what any decent bloke would do." The man glared. "I

shouldn't have been the only one giving that guy hell."

"No, you shouldn't. But you did." She stood up on her tiptoes, instinctively reaching out to the man's face, which was already starting to bruise. "Oof, we should get you some ice for that, yeah?"

They went to a McDonald's, got lunch together - he insisted on paying for both of them - and in addition to food, Frankie asked for a cup of just ice. As she tended to his face, Frankie said, "I'll let you handle the other bruises."

The man chuckled. "I wouldn't ask you to do that, anyway."

"Good." Frankie raised an eyebrow. "You're not doing the 'damsel in distress' thing to try to get down my pants, are you?"

A fuller laugh now. "No." A pause. "I'm gay."

Frankie smiled and nodded. "I'm a lesbian."

He took her hand. "If I wasn't gay, though, I'd be asking you *politely* on a date. You're very pretty."

Frankie almost snorted her soda. "People have called me a lot of things. Pretty isn't usually one of them."

"You're striking. You don't look like everyone else. It's a nice look." His fingers traced the vine tattoo on her arm, and she saw the fire sleeve on his own arm.

"Oh wow," she said, reaching out to touch it. She noticed the waves on the other arm. "That's beautiful work."

"You should see my back. I designed what's on my back."

"I have work on my back too." Frankie smirked. "You know, we're talking about tattoos on body parts usually covered by clothing and we don't even know each other's names."

"Oh, right." He facepalmed. "I'm pretty socially awkward, sorry about that." He smiled. "I'm Sören."

"Sören." She liked the sound of that, and the way it sounded in his accent, with the gently rolled r. "I'm Frankie."

"It's nice to meet you."

"Same." Frankie sipped her soda. "You're not from around here, I take it."

"Reykjavik." Nervous laughter.

"Oh, cool. I have a great-great grandfather from Iceland, according to me aunt who's into genealogy and things, he left after that, ah... volcano? erupted in the late 1800s."

"Really? I moved here a couple months ago, after..." A little frown. "Some stuff. An explosion of my own, I suppose you could say. Or more like an implosion."

"Bad stuff, yeah?"

"It's a long story."

"Well..." Frankie took a deep breath. "It's my birthday -"

"Oh, happy birthday! How old are you now?"

"Twenty."

Sören laughed again. "You're just a baby."

Frankie glared. "The fuck I am not, you can't be much older than me, can you?"

"I'll be thirty-one in November."

Frankie raised her eyebrows. "You look young."

"I'm told that a lot. If I didn't have the facial hair I'd look even younger." Sören gestured to her. "So, back to it being your birthday -"

"I don't have much to do, but I have a little cake waiting for me at home, if you want to come back to my flat?"

"I'd like that."

At Frankie's flat above It's A Coffee House, they had cake, listened to Sex Pistols on vinyl, and Sören took off his shirt - Frankie noticed his nipples were pierced - and showed him the phoenixes on his back, one made of fire, one made of water.

"That's fucking bloody gorgeous," Frankie said. "And you *designed* that?"

Sören turned around and pulled his Joy Division shirt back on. "I paint," he said, nodding. "It's part of why I went to the art show. Was seeing what I had to do to show some of my work there."

"You totally should, if it's anything like that."

"I do a mix of things. Landscapes, people." Sören sat down. "I'd like to paint you, actually."

"Me?" Frankie chuckled. "I'm not sure anyone would want to look at that -"

"Nonsense. Besides, when I paint people, I usually... don't paint them as they normally look day to day." Sören made a vague hand gesture, searching for words. "It's hard to explain. I'd have to show you." Then he smiled. "But now it's your turn."

"Yeah, all right." Frankie got up. "I can't believe I'm doing this." She took her shirt off.

"I may prefer men, but you have nice tits."

Frankie threw her shirt at him, cackling. She turned around and gave him the view of her own ink.

"Oh, my fucking god." She heard Sören gasp.

"You like it?"

"Um."

Frankie turned around sharply and glared, her hands on her hips. "What, you don't like it?"

"Oh no, I like it very much. I just. Uh." Sören made another vague hand gesture and reached nervously for the glass of Sprite sitting next to him. "I think I should show you something. It's back at my flat." Sören sipped, looking nervous, like a deer trapped in headlights. "It's relevant to the work you have done."

Frankie normally wouldn't go back with a near-stranger to their flat, but there was something about Sören that made her feel safe around him, like the big brother she always wanted and never had.

Sören's flat was a tiny, sad single-room occupancy in a derelict-looking building. The room was clean, and he'd brightened it up a bit with posters and a few odds-and-ends - Frankie smiled at the Eeyore doll on his bed - but it made her sad to see him living in a place like that, remembering her own experience growing up in council housing. Sören had an easel set up near a table against the wall, with paints and brushes strewn out over the table. Sören went under his bed and pulled out a large plastic-wrapped bundle.

Inside were several canvases, themselves individually wrapped, and tagged. Sören unwrapped one, and handed it to Frankie. It was the phoenixes, in the backdrop of space, and their tails were twined, hooked through the top of an eight-pointed flaming star, shining with rainbows.

"Oh." Frankie's eyes widened, staring at the star. It was like the stylized one she had on the back of her neck. "*Oh.*"

"Oh indeed." Sören nodded. "Interesting coincidence, yes?"

"I already liked you, but now we *have* to be friends."

Over the next several weeks Sören and Frankie spent a lot of time together when they didn't have to work - most of the time Sören went to Frankie's flat, since there wasn't really space in his room to entertain company. They didn't always stay there, sometimes going on trips to galleries and museums and parks. Frankie liked watching Sören draw, and she encouraged him to try to show his work, happy for him when he landed a show.

The night before his show, she got a call from his cell. "Yo," she said.

"Can I come over and take a shower?"

"What?"

"The water's broken over here."

Frankie frowned. She'd been feeling guilty every time he went home back to *that* - she'd made him stay overnight more than once, the two of them cuddling platonically in her bed like siblings, just so she could try to spoil him a little, she didn't have much but she felt like a king compared to him. "How long has the water been out?"

"Ah, since yesterday. The landlord says he'll get on it -"

"Bullshit." She took a deep breath and got the nerve to say what she wanted to tell him

that first night they hung out. "Pack your shit, you're moving into the spare bedroom."

Now it was Sören's turn to say "what."

"You heard me. Get your arse down here. You're on a month to month over there, it's not like you can't leave, and I'm not having you live like that anymore. Rent here wouldn't be much more than what you're paying there, and you'd better be able to afford it if you came to work downstairs, anyway."

Sören showed up an hour and a half later, wheeling three suitcases, and he'd hired one of his neighbors to help him with the rest, carting two hand trucks. Sören didn't have much, but he was cautious about how he transported his art supplies.

They made macaroni and cheese with tuna in it, which was what they had on hand, and sat in the living room, eating to the sound of Siouxsie and the Banshees on vinyl. "I really appreciate this," Sören said.

Frankie hugged him. "I have your back. You're a brother to me."

—

A few weeks after Sören moved in with Frankie, he had a second hookup with someone from Grindr. Sören spent the weekend with the guy, and then he brought him back to the flat to have coffee.

"This is Justin," Sören said. "Justin Roberts."

Justin looked at Frankie like she was something the cat dragged in. "How d'you do," he said curtly.

"Hey." Frankie nodded. She looked at Sören. "You normally don't bring guys back here."

"I normally don't see Grindr dudes more than once." Sören blushed. "We... had fun."

"We did indeed." Justin grinned at him. "We're going to have a lot more fun, I think." He fiddled with a white gold ring on his right hand.

Sören bit his lower lip and did that thing with crinkling his nose that Frankie would have been all over if she was into him like that. Justin certainly reacted to it. "You are so cute," Justin purred, reaching out to tousle Sören's curls.

Sören seemed happy - and Frankie wanted him to be happy, he'd told her the tragic story of that cunt Alejandro who'd stomped on his heart *I better not ever meet him or he'll catch these hands* and all the lonely nights of fuckbuddies and one-night-stands. He didn't feel very good about himself, which was ridiculous considering he was gorgeous, talented, and an incredibly sweet guy.

But there was something about Justin... she didn't know what... that she didn't like. She told herself she was probably just reacting to his looks, as he reminded her of the boys who'd given her a hard time about being a chubby, nerdy, short ginger when she was a schoolgirl. Justin was taller than Sören, the muscular build of an athlete, short-cropped sandy blonde hair, blue eyes. He looked like a male model, with pleasant features and a perfect toothpaste smile, and he dressed preppy. Frankie was honestly surprised Sören

went for him, he usually liked brunet men or silver fox daddy types, and Justin seemed younger than Sören, early twenties or so, when Sören usually went for older. She didn't want to be judgmental of someone's looks, the same way she didn't like being judged, assumed to be a hooligan because of her punk rock appearance, but she couldn't shake the feeling there was something *off* with him.

She still tried to manage a smile and be polite. "So, uh, Justin, what do you do?"

"I play football for FC Arsenal."

She liked him even less now. *Come on, be fair.* "Oh. Football."

"He's not a dumb jock," Sören said. "We were talking about history and stuff."

"When we didn't have our mouths full." Justin snogged him.

If Frankie was a cat, her claws would come out and she would hiss *you get away from him!* She felt embarrassed by her reaction - *it's not like I'm in love with Sören or anything* - but it wasn't jealousy. She just... didn't like this guy.

She would be nice, for now, but she was going to keep an eye on him.

—

2016

It didn't take long for Frankie's gut instinct to prove itself true, once again. Sometimes she hated that she knew things about people, and she knew Justin Roberts was a grade-A arsehole.

Justin had just shown up, making his way down to Sören's room without saying a word to her, just that evil look he gave her whenever he had to be in the same space as her. He had a couple duffel bags with him even though he was just spending the night - he was fucking high-maintenance, Frankie never needed that much stuff if she was just going to her girlfriend's or her girlfriend was coming here. Sören was in the bedroom painting, and she heard Justin let out a sigh of disgust as he entered.

"Where the fuck d'you expect me to put these with your bloody art supplies everywhere?"

"You can put them down on the floor by the bed -"

Justin snorted. "I don't even know why you're wasting your time with that shit."

"We've been over this. It's what I do. I can no more stop making art than I can stop breathing."

"It's a stupid hobby. Your work isn't that great, you know?"

"I don't care if it's good or not. I care if I express myself."

This is why he stopped looking at places to show his work, stopped talking about showing it anywhere. Frankie swallowed hard. She thought about barging in and saying something, throwing him out, but -

There was the sound of something being *thrown*, and Sören let out a cry. "What the *fuck* are you doing?"

"I don't have any place to put my things, because you have all that *shit* out. Taking up space. Taking up *my* time." His voice was softer. "*Our* time."

"You know how many fucking hours I spent working on that, and now it's *ruined*?"

"It was already ruined."

Sören started crying. "How can you claim to care about me, claim to love me, and say things like that? You know I don't give a fuck about sports and I try to support you doing football because it's important to you, but you can't give me the same courtesy with my art?"

"Would you listen to yourself? You're such a... stereotype... sometimes. Jesus Christ. Such a drama queen, a fucking snowflake."

Sören's crying got louder. He was starting to have an asthma attack, too - he'd been having a lot of those lately, probably due to the stress Justin put him through.

That was it. Frankie walked down the hall and banged loudly on the door, even though it was open. "Hey Justin?" she said. "Piss off."

"I'm sorry, was this any of your FUCKING business?" Justin snapped, and the look in his eyes scared her.

She stood her ground. She looked at the smear of wet paint on the wall, and then on the floor where the painting had fallen, the painting smeared now. She felt like crying, looking at it.

Sören puffed on his inhaler, and their eyes met. Frankie didn't know how anyone could want to hurt Sören the way Justin hurt him, it was like hurting a puppy, right down to those sad dark brown puppy dog eyes.

"Frankie," Sören said apologetically, "let us handle this by ourselves, please."

"Yeah, you'd *better* let us sort this out," Justin said with gritted teeth, his fist clenching. Frankie was to take that as a threat.

Frankie continued to stand for a moment, but then she went back to her room. "Right," she said. She felt terrible about leaving.

"That mouthy fat cow you live with needs to learn some manners," Frankie heard Justin snarl.

"You know..." Sören sounded angry now. "You're crossing a line making fun of Frankie. That's my best friend, she's like a sister to me, and I don't appreciate you being disrespectful of her, talking shit about her weight, or talking shit about *anyone's* weight or appearance in general. You know how superficial that is? When you'd tried so very hard to prove to me you weren't a dumb jock? You're sure acting like it now."

There was a crash, and the sound of more things being slammed around, and Sören screamed, "WHAT THE FUCK? DO YOU KNOW HOW MUCH THOSE ART SUPPLIES

COST?"

"Everything I have in those bags is worth more than your precious fucking *art* supplies," Justin snarled, "or the entire catalogue of your precious fucking *art*. It isn't just Frankie who needs to learn some manners, it's you."

Sören was sobbing again. "What the fuck is wrong with you?"

"What the fuck is wrong with *you*?"

Frankie came down again. "If you don't stop throwing shit *right now*, I'm calling the fucking police."

"You go ahead and do that," Justin said. "I'm sure they'd be thrilled to know you have pot here. What was it you bought the other day, an ounce? That's a lot of weed to be busted with."

Frankie took a deep breath.

"Don't call the police," Sören said. "We'll..."

"Yeah, I'll calm down." Justin looked at Frankie, playing with the ring on his right hand again. "Be a luv and fetch me some water, yeah?"

"Get your own fucking water," Frankie said. "You don't get to boss me around like you do Sören, and you shouldn't be bossing him around, either." She glared at Sören, wishing there was some way to get through his thick skull he deserved better than this, before turning on her heel.

She heard Justin flop down on the bed. "I'm sorry," he said.

"I just." Sören sighed. "Why did you DO that?"

"I had a rough night again. I had those dreams... the fire. That burning eye." Justin sounded close to tears himself. "The voice of my father, screaming at me, all the shit he used to say to me."

"Oh, honey. I understand. But you really... you got to get some anger management classes, or something."

"Yeah. I know I need help. It's just hard talking about this shit to people, you know? And what would me mates think if they found out I was in therapy, if it was leaked that football star was getting 'psychiatric counseling'."

"Well, there should be privacy laws here where that shit shouldn't get out to begin with -"

"Someone could see me go to and from a doctor's office. And really, Sören, I'm not like you. I'm not... good with feelings. I'll buy you new paints, I guess. I still think that you're better off doing something else with your life, like going back to school, getting a good job. A normal job."

"I'll never be normal."

"You'll never be normal when you keep telling yourself that, Sören. If you cared about me, if you cared about *us*, and our future, you could try harder."

Sören doesn't need to be normal. He's wonderful the way he is, you horrible CUNT
Frankie wanted to scream down the hall, but she didn't.

Justin was just like the arseholes her mum used to date, and Frankie was flashbacking now, thinking about it, the way they'd lose their temper and go off on her mum, and she'd have to be the adult and clean up the mess, tend her mother's bruises. She was paralyzed by fear, gripping blankets white-knuckled, sick to her stomach.

—
3 months later

Sören had the day off, and Frankie was down in the coffee shop, with her aunt and two other employees. But it was a slow day, and Frankie was feeling a little nauseated for some reason. Must be something she ate, or maybe her period was coming early.

Or maybe there's something going on. A "storm warning", she'd call moments like this, intuition blaring warning bells in her head, her body.

She felt a shiver, and looked at her arms, breaking into gooseflesh.

"I'm gonna clock out and head upstairs," she told Siobhan. "I don't feel so good."

"I understand. We'll man the fort here." Siobhan patted her.

Frankie went upstairs. She expected Sören to be at Justin's flat, but she could hear their voices. Loud. Judging from the distance, they were in the kitchen. Frankie turned the key and went in very, very quietly, not closing the door behind her, hanging to one side of the living room wall so she wouldn't be seen.

"I should have stuck to what I said a few weeks ago when I told you I wanted you gone," Sören said. He was crying again. "After you *raped* me."

"You know you wanted it," Justin said. "You know you still want me." His voice dropped. "You know nobody else will want you."

"What I want? Is for this... this *insanity* to be over. You keep apologizing for the shit you do, you tell me 'baby I'll change' and it's a honeymoon period of wining and dining and having fun, but then it all comes back to this. You don't love me. You're using me. You couldn't possibly love me, because you don't *understand* me. You make fun of me, especially my art, which is something I put a piece of my fucking soul into -"

"There you go again with your bloody fucking art. You love your art more than me!"

Sören laughed. "You sound like you're jealous."

"Jealous? I told you, your art isn't that fucking good. But it's not like you've ever painted me, either. Instead you paint that fat fucking cow you live with -"

"I told you to stop mocking her weight, and I meant it." Sören sneered, showing his teeth. "And yes, I painted Frankie. She's beautiful *to me*."

"Fuckin' painted her in armor with that stupid fucking star on her stupid fucking neck, and

a sword and a bloody shield. The bitch can't lift more than a fucking soda bottle."

Frankie thought about saying something then, but her gut instinct told her to keep quiet, and wait. She watched them - Sören was leaning up against the kitchen counter, and Justin was close to him, in his personal space, a couple meters away from their makeshift kitchen table with its steel folding chairs.

"You need to stop," Sören said. "But you're proving my point about why I haven't painted you. If I did paint you? You wouldn't like it. You know that scene from the first Hobbit movie, with the orcs? *That's you.*" Sören pointed towards the door. "Now get you gone."

Justin came closer to him. "No." Then he backhanded Sören.

Now. Silently, like a stalking cat, Frankie moved forward. The man scared her, but she was on an adrenaline rush. She snatched one of the steel folding chairs. "HEY! Twat!"

Justin turned around. Frankie slammed the chair into him once, twice, three times.

He went down.

While he was rolling on the floor in pain, Frankie grabbed the tail of his shirt and began to *drag*. Justin was right about her not being physically strong at all - she had no idea where this sudden surge of power came from, but there it was. She moved down the stairs, dragging him roughly, making sure he bumped on every step. "Fuckin' arsehole," she snarled as she dragged him. "Fuckin' piece of SHIT, you worthless fucking CUNT, you can go to bloody fucking HELL!"

When Justin was on the curb, too frozen in pain to get up, Frankie kicked him in the balls with her steel-toed Doc Martens. Then she *stomped*, savoring the way he screamed.

She loomed over him, all of five feet tall, feeling like she was twenty feet. She didn't raise her voice, but it sounded like a deafening roar. "You stay away from Sören," she said. "He doesn't want you, and you're not to come back here anymore, this is MY flat too, and that is MY rule. And if you don't stay away, and I find out you EVER lay a hand on him again... that. Will. Be. *The last time you ever HAVE a hand.*"

Frankie kicked him one more time for good measure. "I won't stop there, either. Maybe I'll stab you, mess that pretty face of yours. Or cut off your little three-centimeter cock."

Their eyes met, and held, and then Frankie spat on him and stormed upstairs.

Sören had been watching the whole thing from the window, and then he turned to look at Frankie, but it seemed like he was staring at something far away. He had that look on his face before, when he and Justin got into it.

Frankie locked the door, locked the deadbolt, and then she came over and hugged Sören tight. "He's gone," she said.

He dropped to his knees, shaking, and she held him as he cried like a baby. Up against the kitchen counter, Frankie rocked him, petting his curls, making soothing noises. "He's gone. It's OK. It's all right."

"You put yourself in danger," Sören choked out. "He's bigger than you are -"

"I handled it."

"Frankie." Sören looked up. "I feel like such a fucking coward." He sniffed. "The first time he hit me, I hit him back, and he whaled on me..." He shuddered. "I learned not to fight back. Just like I stopped fighting back with my uncle Einar, till I -" He stopped himself from finishing that sentence; Frankie wondered why, but wouldn't press it. "He scared me, so much. I'm a scared fucking coward."

"You're not a coward at all, luv." Frankie kissed the top of his head. "He broke you. But we're going to put you back, together."

Sören sobbed again, and leaned on her.

A few moments passed, and Sören calmed down a little, and then Frankie said, "He raped you?"

Sören looked away, looked down, and then he nodded.

"You should call the police, put his arse in jail -"

"Do you know how fucking hard that is to prosecute, especially without DNA evidence? And it may be 2016, but don't think for a moment that we wouldn't be in there, as two gay men, and not be dealing with prejudice in the court system. Please. He's not even out of the closet. Golden boy of football, Justin Roberts, acts straight, his word against mine." Sören shook his head. "I don't want to have to relive that all over again to try to lock him up." The tears came again. "Like I told you, I'm a coward."

Frankie hugged him tight. "Shhhh. You're not a coward, Sören." She pet him. "You're more of a man than he will ever be."

"I really hate the 'be a man' shit in society, it's sexist and toxic, but OK."

Frankie kissed his forehead.

Justin left after awhile - Frankie assumed he drove off - and they both kept a nervous watch at the window, waiting for the police in case Justin pressed charges for assault, but the police never showed up. Eventually, they got pizza, and that night Sören slept in Frankie's bed for the first time in months, curling up like two cats. Frankie held him.

"It's going to be OK," she soothed.

"I'm sorry you've had to deal with him being here, being like this -"

"It's over now." She managed a smile and twined one of Sören's stray curls around her finger. "And listen. This is what family does."

Sören nuzzled her and nodded. "You should meet my sister Margrét. The two of you would like each other very much, I think."

"I can't afford to go to Iceland, unfortunately."

"Neither can I, right now, but maybe we can save up and take a vacation there in a couple years? My family would adopt you, I think."

Frankie squeezed him. "That would be nice, considering I don't have much family to speak of." She resumed petting him. "You rest now, OK?"

Sören sighed. "I'm still so wound up."

"Here. I'll sing to you." She thought of something to sing, and then she thought of a song she'd heard on an American sitcom once.

Soft kitty, warm kitty

Little ball of fur

Happy kitty, sleepy kitty

Purr, purr, purr

Sören laughed, and booped her nose. Then he closed his eyes, resting on her shoulder. Outside, the rain started to fall.

Higher Than Love

Chapter Summary

In Amsterdam, in 2012, Sören and "Alejandro" have a fun and passionate afternoon.

Friday, April 20th, 2012

Amsterdam, the Netherlands

Sören and Alejandro had been in the Netherlands for five days now; Sören had spent the first four days visiting art museums and notable places in art history - especially the Van Gogh House, getting a personal tour of the building, a reverence in him as he saw the room where Van Gogh had stayed a few months in 1883. Sören couldn't believe it, "Starry Night" by Van Gogh was his very favorite painting, and here he was *in that same room* he'd lived in, everything preserved. It was one of the most amazing experiences of his life.

Alejandro, himself, was amazing for knowing Sören would love this, wanting to give him that experience.

Like Van Gogh, Sören was inspired by nature, and rural areas in particular, but unlike Van Gogh, Sören's paintings had a photorealistic quality to them... and were also surreal, with people, places, and things taking on a fantastic, magical, mythic life of their own. So after drinking in all that he could of the old masters for four days straight, Sören was ready to see more of Amsterdam. It was peak tulip season, and Alejandro smiled as he walked Sören through an explosion of color, Sören flailing, skipping around, and making happy noises like a big kid, even leaning in to smell the tulips. Sören sketched for awhile, visions dancing in his mind's eye of tulips and fairies.

They stopped at a coffeeshop with a magnificent view of nearby tulip gardens, and the coffeeshop itself was magnificent, with stained glass windows and lamps. It was also notable for another reason.

"*Kan ik u interesseren voor gras van topkwaliteit?*" asked their waiter.

Alejandro raised an eyebrow.

"What did he say?" Sören asked.

"He just offered us marijuana."

"Well, it is legal here, and..." Sören ran a hand through his curls. "I haven't toked up in awhile. And it's 4/20, so it's, like... obligatory."

Alejandro allowed Sören to smoke pot occasionally in their apartment in Reykjavik - it enhanced Sören's creativity, and gave him a better appreciation for music, and made Sören more sensual - but Alejandro had refrained, himself, his only vice being alcohol and even that moderately. Alejandro nodded, and turned to the waiter. Even

though most people in Amsterdam spoke English - the lingua franca for the Icelandic Sören and Alejandro, the Brazilian - Alejandro still replied in Dutch, a show of respect to the host country.

"*We willen graag het menu zien, dank je.*"

Now it was Sören's turn to raise an eyebrow, chuckling.

"What?"

"You." Sören leaned in and kissed the tip of his nose, grin broadening at the way Alejandro blushed and grinned at that. "You're from Rio, but you fucking speak Dutch like a native."

"Well, I lived here for awhile."

"Ah, it's no wonder you know so much about the city." Sören cocked his head to one side, like a curious cat.

Alejandro nodded, and looked out at the garden, but his silver-grey eyes seemed further away. "*Ik kan je een paar verhalen vertellen over waar ik ben geweest en wat ik heb gedaan, kleintje.*"

Before Sören could comment further - starting with asking him what the hell he just said - the waiter was back with the menu. Sören recognized the kush varieties right away. "A pre-rolled of Pineapple Kush," he said, passing the menu back to the waiter, "and I'd like a, um..." He turned to Alejandro. "You lived here, and you know me, what do you recommend for my sweet tooth?"

"*Appelbeignets.*"

"That. What he said."

"What about you?" The waiter turned to Alejandro.

"*Koffie verkeerd.* For both of us."

Sören grinned, and then leaned on Alejandro as they waited; Alejandro wrapped his arms around Sören, nuzzled his curls, rocking him gently. They were lost enough in that tender moment that Sören startled a little when the waiter came back.

Between sips of the sweet coffee, which even came with a little cookie, Sören puffed on a joint. After two hits he had a coughing fit, and by the fourth hit it was clear the pot was kicking in. He pulled out his cell phone and took a couple selfies of himself toking up, making funny faces into the camera.

When the joint was halfway finished, Sören started working on his *appelbeignets*, delighting in them as Alejandro knew he would, and proffered the joint to Alejandro. "Are you quite sure you don't want any of this?"

"I'll pass."

Sören gave him the puppy dog face.

"Oh no. Not that face."

Sören batted his eyelashes.

"Sören. Dammit, Sören... not the sad puppy eyes... my kryptonite..."

Sören snickered. Then he said, "It won't kill you to take a couple puffs. At least once in my life I'd like to see you all stoned and stupid, what better place to do it here, since it's legal and it's 4/20 and we're here to have fun anyway?"

Alejandro rolled his eyes, and then smiled and nodded. "All right."

Sören passed the joint. Alejandro took a hit, and, from having watched Sören smoke several times, he held the smoke in his lungs for a moment before exhaling. Alejandro passed it back to Sören, and then Sören puffed and passed it back to him, and Alejandro took two hits, coughing after the second.

"Don't bogart that shit, man," Sören said, taking it back.

They finished the joint together, and Alejandro stole one of Sören's *appelbeignets*, giving him a naughty look, and Sören playfully swatted him. "Thief," Sören said.

"I bought it."

"You're still a fucking thief... you... *apple...big...nuts...* thief."

Alejandro almost choked on his mouthful of apple fritter, eyes twinkling with amusement. "Sören... don't ever change."

Sören wagged his finger. "Don't think that gets you off the hook, thief."

Alejandro blew him a kiss. "I'll make it up to you."

"You better, or I'll have you arrested by the... the... pastry police, or something."

"Sören, there is no such thing as the pastry police."

"Listen... I will paint pastry police and bring them to life, hauling you off to pastry jail, where you're forced to wear a silly hat and bake cookies." Sören laughed at his own joke. "This is the story of how the Keebler Elves got started. Enjoy your new life as a cookie elf, bitch."

Alejandro was red now, tearing up, shaking with silent, full-body laughter. "You are so *weird*."

"You fucking love it."

"I do."

Sören and Alejandro got up, paid for their coffee and pastries and weed, tipped the waiter, and though they were both high, they managed to make it out of the coffeeshop, leaning on each other, and down several blocks to catch a bus.

"Where do you want to go now?" Alejandro asked.

"Are you OK to drive?"

"I'm probably not too fucked up to drive, yeah."

They took the bus to a car rental, and Alejandro rented an Audi for the afternoon. "I want to see the countryside," Sören said. "The same countryside that inspired Van Gogh."

Out in the middle of nowhere, passing by a large stretch of fields, Sören told him to pull over. Sören got out of the car first, breathing in the air, twirling a little as he headed into the grass. He plopped down, and a moment later Alejandro joined him. Sören lay back on the ground, looking up at the clouds. Then Alejandro was laying next to him.

They just lay there for awhile, enjoying the silence, the peace. Alejandro was deeply relaxed, and started flexing his fingers and toes, kneading and purring like a cat. It made Sören giggle, and hearing his laughter made Alejandro laugh too.

A few minutes later Sören asked, "What are we laughing at?"

"I don't know."

"Wow, we're high *as fuck*."

"I think we're higher than fuck."

"How high is fuck, anyway?"

"Too damn high."

Sören started snorting from laughing so hard and this made Alejandro laugh harder. At last, Alejandro rolled Sören onto his back, claiming his mouth with a kiss.

"I'm glad you're happy," Sören said, playing with his hair, nuzzling him, kissing him back. Then, with an impish grin, he teased, "Even if you are a pastry thief."

"Oh, you." Alejandro kissed him, harder.

The kisses got more heated, and soon they were feverishly undressing each other, not caring that someone else could drive by and see them. With clothes scattered next to them, hands roamed over bare skin, kissing passionately, hard cocks rubbing together.

Then, mid-kiss, Sören's eyes opened, a look of alarm on his face.

"What?" Alejandro said.

"I know you don't like having your picture taken but I want to..." Sören stroked his face. "...remember this moment. Remember a time when you were completely happy."

"You are so sweet."

Sören fiddled with his phone, getting it ready. He held the phone over them, the other arm wrapped around Alejandro, and set the timer. He intended for them both to smile into the lens, but Alejandro surprised him by collecting their precum on the index and middle fingers of his left hand and sticking them into Sören's mouth, lips grazing Sören's neck, right when the camera went off. Sören heard himself moaning, overcome by the sensuality of it.

He looked at the result. "Fuck, that's hot."

"You're hot." Alejandro snatched the phone out of his hand and nibbled Sören's neck. "I want you *now*."

Sören reached for the lube he habitually carried in his pocket, passing it to Alejandro, who poured it over his cock and into Sören's opening. Sören was already open from their lovemaking that morning, and Alejandro pushed into him easily. Sören gasped and Alejandro groaned once he bottomed out inside him, and Alejandro just paused, both of them overcome by the emotional intensity of the two made one flesh.

Alejandro took his hands and began moving in him slowly, the two of them kissing passionately, drinking each other, breathing each other's breath; to Sören, the high making everything feel more real, it felt as if they were breathing each other's souls with each kiss. The sensations were much more delicious than usual, and they made it last for a long time, drowning in the exquisite sensitivity, taking their pleasure to new depths, new heights. Touching each other, every inch of flesh they could reach, smooth skin soft as petals, over the steel of their muscles, both of them like sculptures come to life. It seemed to Sören that they were making art right here, right now, a beautiful performance, a microcosm of life and death and rebirth, the broken pieces of their hearts, their lives, fitting together as Alejandro thrust inside him, putting them back as one greater whole.

"I am yours and you are mine," Sören husked, kissing him deeply.

That did it, Alejandro no longer being slow and gentle but taking him hard, wild, hungry, with Sören bucking his hips back at him, panting "yesyesyes", meeting his lover with his own hunger and need and *passion*, scorching them both. His nails dug into Alejandro's back, wanting this, mad for it, like he was craving a drug, like he was craving *air*.

"Don't stop," Sören sobbed. "Don't stop, don't stop, don't you *fucking* stop..."

"Mine." Alejandro's teeth went into Sören's neck. "You're mine..."

"Yes. Yours. And you're *mine*." Sören bit him back, and Alejandro cried out; Sören could feel him lose it a little, just from that, and Sören gave a small, victorious smile. *Yes. Mine.*

Tasting the metallic tang of blood, they kissed deeply, both moaning into the kiss, Alejandro continuing to pound away at him, almost like he was driving Sören into the earth, to root him there, root this moment here, never letting go. The pleasure was almost unbearable. They both needed to come, but they needed to *be here now*, make this last as long as they could, rising higher and higher, both of them shaking, gasping, panting, wild, frenzied, so much heat between them it was a wonder the grass wasn't set on fire. Sören heard himself sobbing, wailing, screaming into the sky, the clouds, soaring in the blaze of glory in his release like the phoenix he was. When Alejandro pushed him over the edge into ecstasy, cum erupting all over both of them, Sören sang out his name like he was calling out to a god. *My religion is you.*

"Sören." The name was choked out, yet somehow a roar. Alejandro shuddered and Sören gasped as he felt Alejandro spending into him, hot cum like lava, the blasts against his sensitized prostate making his orgasm even better; Sören felt his hole throbbing, and Alejandro groaned and shivered again, feeling Sören pulsing around him. "Oh, Sören."

"I love you," Sören said, taking his face in his hands, kissing him deeply.

"I love you, Sören." He kissed Sören back. "I love you so much. I love you so damn

much..."

They lay there for awhile, and the breeze stirred them back to consciousness. Sören and Alejandro reluctantly put their clothes back on, but before they could get back in the car, Sören wanted to linger just a few minutes longer to watch the clouds. Alejandro curled up on him, dozing a little, the picture of contentment, until Sören nudged him and pointed. "Look, that cloud looks like a llama."

"Hey, it does."

"And that one looks like an elephant. They're escaping from the circus. Running away together."

"Where would they go?"

"I don't know... oh look, there's a sailboat. They'll get on the sailboat."

Alejandro laughed. "You're so silly."

"When I was a kid, I used to do this back in Akureyri, just lie around outside and watch the clouds, and make up stories in my head. I never really stopped. I never stopped being a kid, I think."

"I noticed." Alejandro turned to him. "You have a beautiful innocence to you." He put his hand on Sören's heart. "Don't ever lose that."

"The world has been cruel to me, but there is still so much goodness in the world, in people, in the experience of being alive." Sören squeezed Alejandro's hand. "If I'd successfully killed myself six years ago, I wouldn't be here right now, with you, seeing all of this. Doing... all of this." He stroked Alejandro's face, his glorious mane. "You told me you lived here before, so I hope it's not boring to you, but I really appreciate you taking me here, showing me all of this -"

Alejandro put his finger to Sören's lips, and then traced them. He moved closer. "Sören," he husked. "Before I met you, I was very... weary. I've been through a lot. Not just what you know about, but there's more." He looked away, and then looked back. "You help me see the world through new eyes. You give me back a sense of wonder I lost a long time ago."

"The world is an amazing place, full of little miracles, little beautiful details that most people don't see, walk by every day and take for granted." Sören pointed to the wildflowers near by. "There's an entire little kingdom right there. When I paint I don't just paint what's visible to the naked eye, but everything has a story. I try to listen."

"You know what?"

"What."

"You're still *really* high." Then Alejandro smiled and kissed his cheek. "But you're beautiful."

They walked hand in hand to the car. Alejandro put on music - he didn't like to drive without music on - and now it was Sören's turn to doze a little in the passenger's seat. But he was roused when he heard Alejandro singing along with U2.

*I try to sing this song
I, I try to stand up
But I can't find my feet.
I, I try to speak up
But only in you I'm complete.*

*Gloria
In te domine
Gloria
Exultate
Gloria
Gloria
Oh, Lord, loosen my lips.*

*I try to sing this song
I, I try to get in
But I can't find the door
The door is open
You're standing there, you let me in.*

*Gloria
In te domine
Gloria
Exultate
Oh, Lord, if I had anything, anything at all
I'd give it to you.*

Alejandro was looking at him, singing to him, and the passion in his voice, the passion in those beautiful silver-grey eyes - the wonder in his eyes, like Sören was something miraculous - brought tears to Sören's own. He had never felt so loved, never felt so much love for someone as he did now, the sensitive, gentle musician who was the thief of his heart, his very soul.

I will always love you, Alejandro. But what he felt, seemed even beyond love itself.

Phoenix

Chapter Summary

Sören has to start his life over again in Iceland, with some help from his sister Margrét.

TRIGGER WARNING: The first part of the story deals with abuse from Sören's past, including his sister's experience with transphobia.

1995

Akureyri, Iceland

Sören could feel it before he heard it - the sound of his uncle Einar opening Magnús's door, the telltale sound of the belt.

"Get up," Einar growled. It was after eleven-thirty at night, and the kids had school tomorrow; they needed to be sleeping at this hour. Sören had not been able to sleep, tense and anxious like he was waiting for a storm - he knew why, now. He often knew things, before they happened, but not always. *Not often enough*. But Sören didn't have to have the gifts he had to know what was about to take place. It was all too familiar.

"I said get up, you little bitch!"

"Uncle, please..." came Magnús's voice. He was fourteen, and slightly built. Einar had over a foot and two hundred pounds on him.

"You even whine like a little bitch! I told you what would happen the next time I caught you wearing dresses and makeup, now take your punishment like a fucking man!"

The sound of the belt again, and Einar's feet moving closer to the bed. Before Sören knew what he was doing, he found himself getting out of bed, and rushing into his brother's room, getting between Einar and Magnús, climbing on top of Magnús and shielding him.

"Go away," Sören told his uncle, shaking with fury.

"Oh, look at you. You think you're tough, do you?" Einar lashed out with the belt, whipping Sören's shoulder. Sören flinched, crying out with pain, but he held fast.

"You're a bully and a coward," Sören snarled. "You think you're a big man, beating up an eleven-year-old boy? You're a piece of shit."

Einar's response was to lash with the belt again. Sören took another hit, and then he did something he knew he'd be punished for later - he waved his hand and made the belt fly out of Einar's hands. Then he waved his hand again and knocked Einar over.

Sören got up off the bed, even though he was in so much pain from the sting of the belt across his back that he could barely stand. He slowly walked towards Einar. He lifted his hand and the belt rose in the air and flew into his hand. "How would you like a taste of

your own medicine, you disgusting fuck?"

Einar leaned over and headbutted Sören, hard enough that it knocked Sören to the floor. Then Sören felt Einar grab him by the tail of his shirt, pull him up, and headbutt him again. Einar slapped him across the face, once, twice, and then his hand reached around Sören's throat and started choking him.

"You're the piece of shit," Einar barked at him.

Sören couldn't breathe, and tried to push with what he could of his power to break the grip, but Einar was too strong. The room was starting to swim.

Einar went on. "You dare challenge me? You are *nothing*. You will never be anything *but* nothing. You are *worthless*. A worthless little shit who defends a worthless little bitch."

"Uncle, if you don't let go of him he's going to choke to death and we'll have to explain murder to the police," Magnús said.

Einar let go, and Sören felt his breath come back in a rattling gasp that burned. He blinked back tears with the shock of pain - if Einar saw him crying it would just make things worse. He was already going to get it tomorrow for moving things with his mind after having it beaten out of him so many times.

Einar got up, gave Sören and Magnús both a look, grabbed his belt, and spat before he stormed out of the room.

Magnús started crying. "I'm sorry. I would have tried to fight him, but I'm not as strong with that as you are..."

Sören weakly pulled himself up and came over to his older brother, giving him a hug.

"It's not right," Magnús said. "I'm older. I should be the one defending you..."

"You get it far worse than I do," Sören said. "We all look out for each other."

Magnús held Sören tight. "I owe you my life."

"You are my blood. You owe me nothing."

—

2006

Twenty-two-year-old Sören Sigurðsson was having the worst year of his life.

Less than a year ago, he'd been a med student, having a clerkship in rural western Iceland. He'd decided to go into medicine at a young age, motivated by finding his mother dead at age six, determined to save people. But during his clerkship he lost an elderly patient to a particularly bad bout of influenza, and had seen other death, as well as permanent serious injuries that would leave patients crippled for life, and one of his patients suffered a miscarriage. Sören didn't just see it, he *felt* it, and it was too much for him.

He'd attempted suicide, and was in the hospital for a month. While he was there, he began art therapy, and his work got some notice. When he was discharged, he decided to try to show his work at a gallery in Reykjavik, which turned into him becoming the sugar baby of the gallery owner. Five months later, he came home to find out he was being replaced with a new boytoy.

He'd spent the last several weeks couchsurfing, trying to save up enough money to get a flat of his own, working while juggling appointments for medication and therapy. He was exhausted, and feeling increasingly like his hope was running out.

And then he got the call from Magnús, who had started going by Margrét. Margrét was up in Akureyri, still living with their uncle Einar and aunt Katrín, despite the ongoing abuse, because Margrét was broke and didn't have options.

Or didn't until now.

"Sören. Can you come get me?"

"...Now?" Sören looked at the time, he still had an hour left on his shift. "I can't afford a plane ticket..."

"Drive up? I know it's five and a half hours from Reykjavik, but..."

"OK... what's going on?"

"Einar is on a bender and called me and threatened to kill me when he gets home and I really think he's going to do it this time. I tried to leave an hour ago and Katrín isn't letting me go anywhere, like she physically got in my way. I don't want to get the police involved."

"Fuck." Sören took a deep breath. "OK. I'm on my way."

Sören told his boss he had to go immediately - "family emergency" - and was promptly fired. He would have to find another job when he got back, easier said than done in his current situation. He predicted he and Margrét were going to be living in his jeep for awhile.

He drove to Akureyri as fast as he could. It was late when he got there, and on his way to the house he saw Einar's car a few vehicles behind his, tailing him. Sören sped, practically flying out of the jeep when he pulled up. He still had a key, and Katrín gave him a look of shock when he walked in.

"I'm here to get my sister," Sören said.

"You don't have a sister," Katrín hissed. "You have a degenerate brother -"

"Katrín, shut up," Sören growled. He stepped forward, and Katrín got in his way, giving him a shove. Then she slapped Sören across the face. Sören didn't believe in hitting women, but his patience was being tried -

Einar stomped in. "Well, look who we have here."

Sören whirled around, and took an elbow to the face. Einar pushed him to the floor, then, and stepped on Sören's balls as he walked over him, making his way to Margrét's room.

"Magnús! Guess what!" Einar's voice rang out. "I'm home. Just like I promised."

"Uncle..." Margrét's voice shook. "Uncle, please..."

"How nice of you to invite your little brother here. You think he can save you?" Einar laughed. "He can watch." Einar began taking off his belt. "He can learn how to be a real man, with what I'm about to do to you."

"Uncle no..."

"Oh yes. You've been acting like a little bitch all these years... you will finally get what little bitches get."

Sören's mouth flew open, realizing what Einar was about to do. And then when he looked up, he saw the look on Katrín's face, who also had that realization, and there was terror in her eyes.

Katrín stepped into Margrét's room, behind her husband. "Einar..." She took his elbow. "Einar, no. Not this..."

Einar backhanded her, and Sören watched as blood came out of Katrín's nose. Then Einar continued taking off his belt, and unzipped his pants. Katrín lunged for him, once again trying to stop him, and he punched her, and kicked her to the ground.

Sören sat up. His eyes met Katrín's. Katrín's voice stammered "Y-your eyes. They're... they're orange. What's happening..."

I am on fire. Sören could feel himself burning internally, seething, like a volcano ready to explode. He grabbed a hold of the couch and pulled himself up, weak and trembling with pain, the pain shooting from his trampled balls especially. He put his index and middle fingers in his mouth and whistled.

Einar turned around. Sören put out his hand and Einar flew two feet off the ground, held immobile, and then Sören clenched his hand into a fist and, still suspended mid-air, Einar stopped breathing. Sören's rage was focused into perfect calm now, holding Einar captive, draining the life force from him.

Even as Einar's face changed colors, Sören kept his fist clenched, kept his grip on Einar, until he felt the spark go out from him, snuffed out like a candle, and there was the stench of urine and shit as Einar's body evacuated. Sören unclenched his fist and Einar's lifeless body dropped to the floor.

Katrín dropped to her knees beside him, sobbing.

The hand that had been the clenched fist, projecting the energy drain, was shaking now. Sören looked at his hand in disbelief. He felt numb shock. *I did that.*

"The coroner's report will likely say he died of a sudden cardiac arrest," Sören said, sounding as cold and clinical as he did when he was an intern, pronouncing judgment on the dead and dying. "I would recommend just telling the paramedics and the police that's all that happened, he had a heart attack and dropped dead."

Katrín nodded, and then buried her face in her hands. It was the first and only time Sören had felt truly sorry for his aunt - abuser though she was, she had also been a victim of

Einar's abuse, and nowhere had that been more evident than tonight.

It was the first and only time Sören Sigurðsson had committed homicide. He had used his power before, a lighter, softer version of it, to give a peaceful death to a few of his patients who were already dying and suffering in their final hours. But this was pure rage. This was not clean, the way the euthanasia had been clean. Some dark abyss inside him was screaming for blood - it took him every ounce of his restraint to not finish off his aunt, too, for all the abuse she'd put them through.

And even as he knew he had been right to do what he did, he was saving his sister, he still felt like he was going to vomit. *Murderer*, his inner voice screamed. *Kinslayer*.

Morality could come later. Sören looked across at Margrét, who had been packing bags as she waited for rescue. "Let's get out of here," Sören said. *Let's get out of here before I kill Katrín.*

They didn't say a word until they were on the road. Then Margrét just said, "I owe you my life," her voice shaking.

—

2007

Reykjavik, Iceland

Margrét managed a weak smile as Sören stepped inside the hospital room, carrying a balloon attached to a large pink bunny doll, the pink bunny dressed in a floral print bonnet and dress.

For a moment Sören sat at his sister's bedside and they just looked at each other, not saying anything, not knowing what to say. It had only been a few days, but it felt like years had passed.

Finally Sören said, "I'm glad you're alive."

Margrét sighed. "I wish I could say the same thing."

"Já, which is why you're in here." Sören leaned back in his chair, and ran a nervous hand through his curls. "At least you didn't throw me out on sight, I was kind of worried you'd do that considering I called the paramedics and all."

"I'd be lying if I said I wasn't pissed off at you," Margrét said, nodding. "But." She took the pink bunny and hugged it. "I'm, ah... I got the diagnosis. They're going to help me start transitioning."

Sören breathed a sigh of relief. "Thank fucking god."

Margrét closed her eyes, rocking as she hugged the bunny tighter. "As badly as I want this - as badly as I *need* it - I'm scared. I'm so, so fucking scared. The hormones. The surgery. It's... a lot."

"You'll get through it," Sören said. He reached across and put his hands on her feet, looking at the painted toenails, tweaking her big toe. "You've made it this far, and we've been through some *shit*. You especially."

"I'm tired." Margrét sounded very old, even though she was only twenty-six. "I'm very, very tired."

"I know. But at least now..." Sören took a deep breath. "It's going to be OK. You'll get the hormones and the surgery, you've got people you can talk to while it's happening... and me, Ari, and Dag are all on your side. You're tired, but there's this fire in us that refuses to die. That keeps burning. And it's a fire that transforms." He gestured to the flame tattoos on his arm, that led out to a fiery phoenix on his back, paired with a phoenix made of water. "We've all had our trials by fire, our transformations. This is yours."

Margrét opened her grey eyes, too bright with unshed tears. "You make it sound like some glorious thing. This isn't glorious. It fucking hurts."

"You are glorious," Sören told her. He took his phone out of his pocket, selected a media folder, then a file, and passed it over. "This just a work in progress, but..."

In the photo of Sören's work in progress painting, Margrét was crowned with flame, wearing fiery silk robes and wings of fire, wielding a scepter. Behind her was an altar, covered with blood, and Margrét smiled bitterly at what she recognized as the severed head of their uncle Einar, his entrails strewn across the table as if she would read auguries from them.

Then she took a better look and saw the breasts, and swirls of runic tribal paint like she was a warrior queen. She choked back a sob as she passed the phone over.

"Dammit, Sören." Margrét shook her head. "That's not even done yet and it's beautiful."

"I can say the same about you." Sören got up and put his arms around her, and she didn't refuse. Sören stroked her hair, pressed a kiss to the top of her head. "I miss you, and you're going to come home soon, and I'll take you to and from your appointments and I'll be here every step of this journey." He tilted her face to his, smoothed a stray lock of her curls, and stroked her cheek. "You told me twice you owe me your life. Well... you owe me this. I want to watch you become who you really are."

Margrét squeezed him, sobbing into his shoulder.

—

2018

Greenwich, London, England

"Sören, I brought you dinner."

Sören usually mumbled a "not hungry" to Frankie, who he'd been staying with for the last two weeks, after Dooku broke up with him. Sören hadn't eaten much at all, only eating when Frankie climbed up on his bed and force-fed him, and Sören would only let her do that for a few bites.

Tonight, he had no words. He just rolled away, buried in his blanket pile. When he moved, he smelled himself - it had been a few days since he'd showered, and he felt gross and disgusting, but had no motivation to shower. He'd just been sleeping, and lying awake. Today, he'd had a particularly nasty set of flashback nightmares about his uncle Einar, remembering his words:

You are nothing. You will never be anything but nothing. You are worthless.

He'd tried his entire life to prove that wrong, but he'd met with failure again and again. He couldn't handle the clerkship in med school, and failed becoming a doctor. The first great love of his life, Alejandro, had left him suddenly. Same with Dooku. He was a thirty-three-year-old barista, and couldn't even handle getting up and going to work since he'd moved back in with Frankie. He couldn't even paint or draw out his pain. It was like the void Alejandro had left, where he'd stopped creating for over a year then, too, except it was worse this time, because *it had happened again*. Dooku had taken his already vulnerable heart and smashed it. At least Alejandro had the excuse of being forced into an arranged marriage by his very Catholic, and probably very criminal, family, though it still stung - he could have fought it, if he'd cared enough, like he should have cared after five years.

Dooku? Was just bored.

Sören would *hate* him, if he could feel anything other than grief. Devastation.

Increasingly, the urge to just give up. No more failing. No more breaking, falling apart, drowning in his grief, his fire burning out.

Murderer. Kinslayer. This is your punishment. This is what you deserve.

Sören closed his eyes and sighed.

"Sören? Did you fucking hear me? Made you grilled cheese and soup. I know it's not fancy, but you like grilled cheese -"

Sören pulled the covers over his head, shutting Frankie out as best as he could without having to expend himself to make words.

Frankie left in a huff, and Sören continued laying there, drifting half-in and half-out of consciousness. He could hear Frankie's voice in another room, heard her crying, and part of him felt bad - he knew he'd caused her tears - but he didn't think she should be wasting her tears on him. A little while later, he felt Frankie shaking him through the blanket pile, and finally Frankie used the Force to throw off the covers. Before Sören could reach out with his own Force powers to snatch them back, Frankie waved her hand and Sören felt himself immobilized.

"Sören," Frankie said, "I'm kicking yer arse out of here."

So now he'd gone from bad to worse. He was going to be homeless, thanks to the only friend he really had?

"I just talked to Margrét." Frankie let go of the grip she had on Sören.

Sören just lay there, too stunned to try to make a go for the return of his blanket fort.

"Margrét," Frankie went on, "has just bought a one-way, non-refundable ticket with your name on it to Reykjavik. You're leaving tomorrow afternoon. I'm taking you to Heathrow, and she's picking you up at Keflavik."

Sören rubbed his face like a wet cat. Then he found his words. "I'm not going."

"You're going, or I'm calling the police," Frankie said. "I asked Margrét how I should handle this, and she's not taking any shit here. You're moving in with her, and you're

going to get some fucking *help* and get out of this... this..." Frankie threw up her hands. "This emo bullshit. I can't take seeing you like this anymore. I've tried to reason with you - this isn't the end of the world, that guy's too old for you anyway, you'll find someone else - but it's like you're dying inside, and I don't know what else the fuck to do anymore." Frankie started crying again. "I'm sorry, Sören, I love you, but I'm worried I'm going to come home one of these days soon and find you fucking dead. So this is how it is. You're going back to Iceland now, and your sister's going to look after you until you can... pull your head out of your sodding arse." Frankie sobbed.

Frankie sat on the edge of Sören's bed, and used the Force to thrust the food at him, which had gotten cold. Sören was too stunned to argue, and nibbled at the grilled cheese. Even cold, he'd had so little food as of late that it was like divine nectar.

After he ate, Frankie took out two suitcases and started taking out Sören's things. "I can ship the rest of your stuff to you once you're out there," Frankie said. "Your sister will pay for that, too."

Sören rubbed his face like a wet cat. He didn't know what to say.

He couldn't sleep that night - a consequence of sleeping most of the day, as well as nerves with the impending flight, but also what that flight back would mean. There was a bitter irony involved: he had left Reykjavik for London in 2015, in the flaming wreckage of grief over Alejandro. Now he was leaving London because of Dooku, the other man who had broken his heart. And in much the same way. One day things were fine and they looked destined to be together forever, the next...

And they left for exactly the same reason.

When morning came, Sören finally dragged himself into the shower, taking a long one, not wanting to offend whoever he had to sit next to on the plane. He didn't protest when Frankie dragged him downstairs and into a cab, climbing in next to him. They didn't say anything to each other all the way to Heathrow.

Finally at the airport, while Sören waited, he and Frankie got a cup of coffee together.

"I don't expect you to thank me right now," Frankie said, "but you better keep in touch."

Sören nodded weakly. *I don't know why you even bother with me* he thought to himself.

"I sodding *heard* that," Frankie said, giving him a look. "Of *course* I'd bother with you. You're *my best friend*. You being an emo cunt doesn't change that."

Sören gave her the finger, and Frankie gave him the finger back, and Sören smiled despite himself.

"I will miss you," Sören said finally.

"Well, good. Give a fuck about *something*." Frankie leaned across the table and affectionately tousled his curls. "Don't let that bastard get you down, you hear?"

"God, Frankie, sometimes I think you hate him worse than I do."

"He broke your fucking *heart* and you are the purest bean to ever walk the face of this gay fucking Earth." Normally that turn of phrase would make Sören snort, but he was still too caught up in his grief, and Frankie frowned, feeling it across their bond. "I swear on me

grandmum, if I ever fucking see him again I will punch him in the fucking gut."

At the departure gate, Sören and Frankie clung to each other tightly, lingering, not wanting to let go. Finally Frankie broke away, put him in a headlock, and gave him a noogie.

"Oi, Sören. Your sister will take good care of you, yeah?" Frankie waved as she walked off.

Margrét was impossible to miss at Keflavik - there weren't too many six-foot-tall women with waist-length curly black hair and multiple piercings wearing elegant gothic lolita walking around. Margrét made a beeline for him. "You lost weight," was the first thing she said, the disapproval strong in her voice and across their Force bond; Sören had always been thin, but now he was gaunt, the result of barely eating for two weeks.

Sören ran a hand through his curls. "You, ah, you know, you didn't have to do this."

"Yes, I fucking did." Margrét took his hand and marched him towards the baggage claim, like he was a small child and she was his mother.

—

Reykjavik, Iceland

Sören had been staying with his sister for close to a month. When Margrét had to go to the UK for a few days to handle the close of her lawsuit against Kylo Ren - and visit her girlfriend Frankie - Sören was left to stay with their cousin Ari.

The last time Sören had lived with Margrét, he'd been using the office in the back of her bar as a single-room occupancy, since her flat was small, one bedroom. There was none of that this time around, as Margrét didn't trust Sören to be by himself. He was on the living room couch, which was uncomfortable and awkward in cramped space and lack of privacy.

Ari's flat in Reykjavik wasn't much bigger but seemed palatial in comparison - his couch at least folded out to a bed. Sören resented being shuffled off to him like a small child needing supervision, but Ari and Margrét pointed out that him even getting angry about it was a good sign. It meant he was caring about something again.

Margrét had exercised tough love with her brother the last few weeks, making him live on a schedule, where they were inseparable for most of the day. Margrét made him see a doctor about a med change, start going to therapy again, and start eating again - after a couple embarrassing incidents of Sören refusing to eat and Margrét spoon-feeding him like a baby, Sören finally ate on his own, but only when he and Margrét had meals together, he still wasn't snacking, and otherwise didn't seem much interested in food.

He hadn't been making art, though Margrét insisted he bring his art supplies to Ari's flat anyway.

Sören expected a softer touch from his cousin Ari, who hid in plain sight as a Force sensitive by teaching yoga, doing Reiki, and giving the occasional Tarot reading; Ari was very much the Sensitive New Age Guy, and loved magical things like Tolkien and the music of Kate Bush and Stevie Nicks. He burned a great deal of incense, and drank copious quantities of green tea. But Sören was wrong about Ari being a softer touch - he

too was a hardass about Sören being on a schedule, and eating properly, and Ari didn't leave him to his own devices, making Sören come with him to the yoga studio as his "temporary assistant".

One of Ari's students had died that week, leaving behind a cat, and Ari had taken in the cat. Ari already had a cat, and his flat was small and had a one-pet policy, so he was looking at rehoming his dead student's cat. The black-and-white, chartreuse-eyed, pink-nosed cat climbed on Sören like he owned him - every time Sören would put him back on the floor, especially when he was trying to sketch for the first time in a month, the cat would climb back on him, purring loudly.

Margrét tried, and failed, to contain her amusement when she picked up Sören and found him with a cat carrier.

"This is Snúður," Sören explained.

"I see."

When they got back to Margrét's flat, she had Sören sit down. "We need to talk," she said, which was never a good sign, and Sören braced himself, holding Snúður defensively, preparing himself to be told he couldn't have the cat.

But that wasn't it. "I won the lawsuit," Margrét said. "I'm giving half to LGBT charity, and I'm giving a quarter of what's leftover after that to you, on the condition that you move out."

Sören's jaw dropped. He tried to make words, and couldn't. He continued stroking the cat, who was purring more loudly.

Finally Sören said, "I don't understand. You were all up in arms about me coming back here and living with you -"

"Which was always meant to be a temporary solution until you got on your feet again." Margrét gestured to the cat. "That. Right there. Tells me you want to live."

Sören skritchted Snúður's chin. "I suppose you're right." He looked down. "When do I have to be out of here?"

"I can give you about a week," Margrét said. "Two at the most. But not more than that, because the longer I delay the inevitable, the worse it's going to be. This is the point where mammi bird has to push baby bird out of the nest."

"Even though my wings are broken."

"I think they're on the mend, if you have someone else to catch worms for." Margrét gestured to the cat again. "Well, maybe not worms."

"I don't think he'd like worms very much, would you? No, you'd like fish, and I'm going to spoil your little fuzzy tummy with all the fishes, yes I am," Sören said to the cat in baby talk.

Margrét shook her head, laughing.

Margrét made Sören come down to the bar with her in the evening. It was the one time when Sören could get privacy if he wanted it, where he'd be allowed to sit in the office,

away from the noise of the crowd, and surf the Internet or do what he wanted to do. Occasionally he did come out to say hello to some of Margrét's friends, and tonight he lingered for awhile serving drinks with his sister. He recognized Margrét's friend Flóki, who came to the bar once a week to every two weeks - close to seven feet tall, and looked like something out of a Viking metal band with long red hair, but was prettier than the Viking metal types tended to be, with high cheekbones, full lips, and piercing green eyes. When he saw Sören he smiled warmly, and Sören smiled back.

"Hej Flóki," he said.

"Hej Sören. What's new with you?"

Margrét put a hand on Sören's shoulder and said to Flóki, "He's moving out in a week or so."

"Oh really?" Flóki looked at Sören with interest. "Where are you going?"

"I don't know," Sören said with a shrug. "Haven't thought about it."

Flóki's curious look became one of concern. "Shouldn't you have a plan in place if you're moving out?"

"Já, probably. That's what smart people do." Sören gave a sheepish smile. "I've never been the smart one. That's my physicist brother."

Margrét snorted. "Dag forgets to tie his shoes." She smacked him in the back of the head and mussed his curls. "You'll figure it out."

"Well, we'll miss seeing you around," Flóki said. "Your smile always lights up the room."

Sören bit his lower lip, feeling his cheeks flush. "*Takk.*"

Sören felt shy enough after that to go to the office and draw - he was sketching Snúður, wearing a crown like a royal cat, batting around gems on the floor like they were cat toys. He was interrupted by a knock at the door, and said "Come in" without looking because it was usually Margrét bringing dinner - but then he felt the presence at the door. It was enough like Margrét's that between that and the timing he hadn't thought much about it - the same bright fire - but he looked up at Flóki.

"Hej, your sister said I could come back here," Flóki said. "I hope you don't mind."

"Er, no." Sören put down his sketching and leaned back in the chair.

"Oh, you draw?" Flóki looked at the sketchpad. "That's really cute. Is that your cat?"

Sören nodded, biting his lower lip again, feeling sheepish. "I just got him, but, já, that's my little Snúdur."

"He's adorable. And you sketch very well. Your sister mentioned your art, but wow, it's something else to see it in person, and this is just a sketch, already there's so much... life?"

Sören smiled. "*Takk.*"

"So, listen..." Flóki cleared his throat. "Before you move out of here and go wherever it is

you're going, you want to get dinner sometime?"

Sören blinked slowly. He pointed at Flóki, then at himself, then back to Flóki and back to himself again, and then felt like an idiot. "You mean, like, a date?"

"It could be that, or we could just hang out. Whatever you're comfortable with."

Sören considered it, and then he gave a nod. "We can see what happens."

"How does day after tomorrow work? I can pick you up at 6?"

"That works for me."

Flóki grinned. "See you then."

Sören watched his ass on the way out, the way his long hair swayed back and forth with his hips, like a dancer. Sören couldn't deny that Flóki was very attractive, and being around him made him feel a little giddy. But he still felt weird about it.

On the other hand, the only way to move forward was to keep moving forward.

Flóki picked him up two days later as promised. They went to Fishmarket, and both ordered the puffin first course and salmon main course. Sören wasn't good at small talk, and Flóki seemed fairly reserved, letting Sören do more of the talking. But then it came back to Sören's impending move.

"I still don't know what I'm going to do," Sören said. "I have to do *something*."

"What do you *want* to do?" Flóki asked. "Surely, there must be something that's been a secret dream of yours for years, even if you haven't been able to indulge it before now due to lack of money, or maybe you think it's too silly and not practical."

"Honestly? I'd like to open an art school," Sören said, "where anyone could come regardless of ability and just... express themselves. And you're right - I haven't had the funds, and it hasn't been practical. I have the funds now, but..."

"But what?"

Sören frowned into his Brennivín. "I don't want to do it in Reykjavik. Too many memories here." He thought of Alejandro, and then he thought of the year after Alejandro broke up with him, and he'd been so dead inside. Reykjavik felt haunted.

"Are you thinking of going back to London?"

Sören snorted, and downed the glass. "No." Dooku was there.

"Is there anywhere you've been that really speaks to you?"

Sören nodded. "Akureyri is my hometown. It's small, it's, well... it's not the best place for me to try to date men... but for better or worse, it's where I came from. I know the land there like the back of my hand, and it knows me." Sören immediately felt self-conscious saying that - it sounded like his cousin's New Age stuff, but it also came dangerously close to revealing anything about his Force sensitivity, which Sören did not discuss with people as a rule, unless he knew they also had it. "I used to drive out to the Goðafoss to just, like... find peace there. There's something about the fjords, and the way the sky looks

at night, and it's just..." Sören sighed. "I ache for it."

"You could set up an art school there, maybe?"

Sören ran a hand through his curls. "It wouldn't be the worst idea in the world, I'd have less competition for paying members than I would if I stayed in Reykjavik. It's just that going home is really loaded for me. I want a simpler life, yes, but it also feels kind of like..." He made a vague hand gesture, not knowing how to explain what he was feeling. "Like the end of an era, in a way. There was a time when I was desperate to get out of Akureyri and see the big city. See the world itself. Now I'm desperate to get out of the big, busy world, and just... go back to something familiar."

"It makes sense to me," Flóki said. "You've been through a lot, from what I heard."

Sören pursed his lips. "What have you heard?"

Flóki swirled his drink around. "Enough." Their eyes met. "Enough that I felt you might need a little extra moral support."

"How very kind of you."

"It's not charity," Flóki said. "From what I've seen of you, myself, you're a good person. And your sister is very fond of you. She doesn't mince words if someone's on her shit list."

"And you're very fond of my sister," Sören said, putting two and two together.

Flóki smiled into his drink. "That would be a way of putting it. But, you know." He looked back at Sören. "Your sister's fond of a few people, not just myself."

"A few, já." Margrét and Frankie had a row while Margrét was in London, and Sören was trying to stay neutral - it was hard to take sides between his best friend and his sister - but they had been so *good* for each other, Frankie truly accepted Margrét being trans, poly, kinky... and he was hoping they'd mutually pull their heads out of their asses and get back together.

Just like you're hoping you and Dooku get back together. The sting. Or maybe even you and Alejandro. It had been four years and it still felt too soon to bring that up; in many ways it felt like he and Alejandro had shared decades together, not five years.

Fuck. Could you not, Sören argued with himself internally.

He and Flóki went to the park afterwards, watching the sunset together. It would have been romantic if Sören wasn't feeling the pang of his lost loves, and indeed, when they got back in Flóki's car, Sören was feeling even more awkward than before. On the one hand, he felt like he should reclaim himself and go back to Flóki's flat and ride that ride for awhile. On the other hand...

Hi my name's Sören and I'm hung up on my two exes.

Flóki drove Sören back to the bar. "I'd give you a kiss goodnight, but..."

Sören patted his knee. "Thank you for understanding."

"I do." Flóki nodded. "Healing takes time. That, I understand maybe more than you think I do." He took Sören's hand, and gave it a gentle kiss. "I hope you find that in Akureyri, and

the next time I see you, you'll light up the room even more."

Sören threw his arms around him, gave him a squeeze, and then pecked his cheek. "I had fun this evening," he said. "I'll see you the next time I'm in Reykjavik, já?"

"Yes." Flóki grinned. "Good night, Sören."

"Good night, Flóki." Sören bounded up to the flat, where Snúður meowed like he hadn't seen his owner in days, even though it had been just a couple hours. Sören picked him up and skritchd him, smiling at the deep, rumbly purr. "Hej Snúður. We're going to go on an adventure."

Margrét hugged Sören from behind, and squeezed him. "You figured it out?"

Sören nodded. "I'm going home."

Margrét knew without being told that meant Akureyri, and nodded. "Things will get better." She chucked Sören's chin, making him laugh. "Things are already better."

Sören shrugged, still holding the cat. "I mean, they still kind of suck."

"A wise man once told me, *There's this fire in us that refuses to die. That keeps burning. And it's a fire that transforms. We've all had our trials by fire, our transformations. This is yours.* He also told me, *I want to watch you become who you really are!*" Margrét took Sören's face in her hands, and their eyes met. "This is your time, now. You will go up there, and you will find your destiny. Maybe not next week, maybe not even this year. It's a work in progress. But you'll get there." She kissed Sören's forehead. "That fire in you hasn't died yet. It's still burning, so bright even in your darkest hour... and it's a bonfire, a signal to whatever is coming, to come."

"Coming, eh?"

Margrét facepalmed. "Goddammit, Sören."

Sören grinned.

—

Fallacies

Chapter Summary

This story was spawned from a "what if?" plotbunny of Jesse Pinkman's path crossing with Maglor's, who in the *Northern Lights* 'verse stays in Alaska for awhile following his breakup with Sören, running a bookstore called Turn Over A New Leaf.

2014

Anchorage, Alaska

Maglor had been in Alaska for several months now - it was October, and "daytime" was more accurately twilight. It was something he was used to from having lived for five years in Iceland, but the population of Anchorage was bigger than the population of Reykjavik, and yet, somehow also quieter. He still wasn't used to the long stretches of no customers from the late afternoon into the evening when he closed up shop, and he was beginning to wonder if he should just keep shorter hours for the winter.

He was reading - he sold books for a living, here at Turn Over A New Leaf, he considered himself obligated to be able to tell customers about new releases if they asked, though this particular bestseller was dreadful. He sipped hot chocolate and let out a little groan as "Policy of Truth" by Depeche Mode came on Pandora, not wanting to think about all the deceptions he'd crafted for his own survival.

The bells on the door jolted him to attention. He watched as a skinny young man, dressed in jeans, boots, and a red plaid flannel shirt under a wool trenchcoat, walked in. He took off his hat, revealing short-cropped platinum-dyed hair. Blue eyes met his.

It was a customer Maglor hadn't seen before. Most of his customers were in fact regulars, and he found the consistency and little interactions comforting, though he tried to not get attached, and didn't let anyone in past an arm's length. Every time there was a new person in the shop, Maglor panicked just a little - he had many good reasons to panic, considering this was the first time he'd set foot in the States since the 1970s and it hadn't gone well for him last time he was here, prompting his departure for Europe. But his gut instinct told him the young man was *mostly harmless*.

Maglor reflected on that impression for a moment. *Mostly harmless.*

"Yo," the young man said.

"Good evening. Can I help you find anything?"

"Uh." The man swallowed hard. "Nah, man, I'm just, like... looking."

"All right. Let me know if you need help. Also there's a coffee machine and a fridge if you want a beverage, just bring it up when you're ready to pay for it." It was a low-interaction, low-maintenance way of providing competition with the coffeehouse-cum-bookstores in town. All he had to do was clean the coffee machine and hot chocolate maker and set them to brew, clean the counter and the sitting area, restock cream, sugar, cups, and the

drinks in the fridge.

A few minutes later, the man got a coffee and brought it to the counter. He paid cash, which itself was unusual. Then the man said, "Actually you might be able to help with something."

Maglor raised an eyebrow and waited.

"I, uh. I like this girl, right. She's real smart, she goes to community college and stuff. She reads a lot. I want to be able to, like, have a conversation with her without sounding like such a dumbass all the time. Read some, like, old-timey books and shit."

Of course. He didn't seem like the kind of person who would read just for its own pleasure, he had to be motivated. Maglor nodded. "So you want recommendations."

"Yeah, if you don't mind."

A small smile. "This is literally my job. Come."

Maglor took him into the classics aisle. It had everything from 18th and 19th century authors up to Tolkien, which was as recent as the selection got. And sure enough, the young man grabbed *The Return of the King* off the shelf, intrigued by the cover art. "Yo, this was made into a movie, right?"

"It was, but it's part of a trilogy and it isn't the first book in the trilogy." Maglor always felt *odd* talking about Tolkien to other people, even other people who wouldn't know he was one of Tolkien's "fictional characters" and Tolkien's work was, in fact, not fictional at all, and he was very much responsible for why that work existed. "Here." He handed over *The Fellowship of the Ring*. "If you're going to read the trilogy this is where you start."

"This is where it begins, yeah?"

"Well, the *Silmarillion* is where it begins, but I don't recommend it for someone who's just getting introduced to the professor's universe."

"Uh... OK. I'll take this, then."

The man paid for it, again with cash, and was on his way out. *My life is so surreal*, Maglor thought to himself. Sometimes he wondered if he was just insane, and then he looked at the scar on his palm, relived the bitter memory of how he'd gotten it.

Being insane would be easier than this.

—

A week and a half later, the young man was back, again when twilight had become nighttime. He got his usual hot chocolate. "You mind if I sit and chill in the lounge for awhile? It's been kind of a rough day."

"No, I don't mind. That's what it's there for."

A few minutes later, Maglor's enjoyment of his Pandora station was interrupted by hearing *singing* from the lounge. Not able to restrain his curiosity, he pattered over. The

man had a blank journal - one he'd taken from the journals section - and he was writing in it as he hummed to himself.

"Oh, yo, what's up?" The man startled a little. "Yes, I'm going to buy this, and, um, the next book in that series, too. I just... had to write this down while I was thinking about it."

"I understand." Maglor said, though he was a little annoyed that the man was writing in the journal before paying for it. "You're... writing a song?"

"Yeah, ever since I came in here last week I started getting the urge to write music again. It's been a hot minute."

"You're... a musician."

"Yeah, I used to have a band, and shit."

"I see. What kind of music? What was the name of your band?"

"We were a rock band, and the name of it was." The man gave a guilty grin, hanging his head, a little sheepish. "TwaüghtHammër."

"Tw..."

"TwaüghtHammër. Changed the spelling to get around censors. Umlauts over the U and E. Yeah. I was real young and real stupid."

"So you speak in the past tense. You're not in this band anymore?"

"Nah man, that was a long time ago, and in a different state."

"Oh, you're not an Alaska native?"

"Nah." The man looked uncomfortable by that admission and looked away, rubbing his head nervously.

"Neither am I." A pause. "I'm from New England." That was a lie, though he had come to the States via New England... before the United States was the United States. Connecticut, in the 1600s.

"Southwest." The man nodded.

Maglor left the man to his composing, though he kept an ear out. Eventually he was called to the classics selection. "This is the next book, yeah?" the man asked, holding up *The Two Towers*.

"Yes. What do you think so far?"

"I honestly didn't think I'd get into it at first, but then it sucked me in. I'm really rooting for the Fellowship."

Maglor smiled. "I would hope so." A standard question. "Who's your favorite?"

"Honestly? Elrond. He seems like the kind of dude I would have liked to have as a dad."

Maglor's smile faded. He could feel the brokenness in the young man - a flash of mental

images of a troubled home life, being the unfavorite of his parents, the ne'er-do-well... he was in a lab... he was holding a gun. Driving to Alaska, chopping wood under the crisp sky, never to see his family again, feeling utterly ravaged, alone. And Maglor thought of his own brokenness, his own exile, and of course, Elrond, who he'd raised from childhood, thought of as his own son. *I would have liked to have you as a grandson.* Which was ridiculous, because they didn't *know* each other, yet Maglor knew, somehow, they were kindred spirits of a sense.

The man's voice cut into his thoughts. "It's so weird how I was reading this like 'yo man this is boring' and then halfway through I got into it, like 'yeah! Elves, bitch!'"

I am the son of the High King of the Noldor, have lived thousands of years, have seen civilizations rise and fall, and this is what my life has become. "Elves, bitch!"

He didn't have enough cash in his wallet when he paid, so he reluctantly pulled out a debit card. Maglor glanced at the name on it - Jesse James Redman. *That's not his real name.* He got the sense that Jesse *was* his real name, but the rest of it was not.

When he handed it back, he said, "Enjoy the book, Jesse."

"Thanks, uh..."

"Mark." A pause. "Mark Lowry." That wasn't his real name either. But it was close enough to it to not cause any slip-ups, and Maglor suspected this Jesse "Redman" was doing the same thing.

"Yeah. Nice to meet you." Jesse put up a hand in farewell, and walked out into the night.

—

He was back a few days later, this time just to get hot chocolate and sit in the lounge singing to himself, writing. Maglor tiptoed in.

"Sorry, man. Coming here, like... clears my head." Jesse rubbed his head nervously. "It's like I can music in here better or something."

That wasn't grammatical, but Maglor wasn't going to correct him.

He came back when Jesse was singing louder. Jesse stopped, self-conscious.

"No need to stop." Maglor poured himself a hot chocolate. "Music is good for the soul."

Jesse snorted. "You say that but you haven't heard my old shit."

Maglor waited, and Jesse sang,

*Black is the color
And beauty is the game
The beast has come to get me
But I don't feel their pain*

*The hotel sign is flickering
And beckons from above
The master of my own domain*

I sow the seeds of love

*Your eyes burn like daggers
Through the triumph of my will
Your hands they smell like gasoline
They cause my love to spill*

*Fallacies, fallacies
All your lies won't set you free
Fallacies, fallacies*

Jesse stopped. "What comes after it is really cringe-worthy."

Maglor was trying to not make a face. It was already pretty cringe-worthy. "No, go on." *I need an excuse to drink later.*

Jesse took a deep breath and continued.

*The windy wind is blowing and the bedsprings creak their tune
My cup is overflowing
Shooting putty at the moon*

*At the Crystal Palace
Where I try to make my stand
My girls all call you Yoko
Say yer gonna kill the band*

*"Work makes free,"
They're telling me
I've got no place to start
Oh, how do I escape you
Little fuhrer of my heart?*

*Fallacies, fallacies
Run for you, dead for me
All your lies won't set you free
Fallacies, fallacies*

*Black is the color
And beauty is the game
The beast has come to get me
But I don't feel their pain*

*I like my Funyuns salty
Like my Jolly Ranchers grape
Can't really say I dig the way
My brain you tried to rape*

*(I hang out though I know I waste my everlasting soul,
because I love your crabby patties and you pack a righteous bowl.)*

*Fallacies, fallacies
Fallacies, fallacies
Fallacies, fallacies
Fallacies, fallacies*

War and conflict
Fallacies
Clowns and convicts
Fallacies
Planets dying
Fallacies
Shit multiplying
Fallacies
Popes and bankers
Fallacies
Spilling tankers
Fallacies
Excuse my attitude
Here comes the hammer!

It's all one big fallacy, yo

Maglor didn't know whether to laugh or to cry.

"You hate it," Jesse said.

"I... didn't say that."

"Nah man, you hate it." Jesse frowned. "I hate it too."

"Well..." Maglor found himself sitting down in an armchair across from Jesse. "All music, whether good or bad - and whether something is good or bad depends on the listener, it's all subjective... music is work. Speaking from my own experience, I've written songs that I wasn't satisfied with upon completion, and then rather than throw out the whole thing I took the part that I *did* like, and made something new built around it." He gestured to Jesse. "I won't lie to you, yes that song was rather cringe-worthy, but the end? You could do something with the end."

"Yeah, maybe." Jesse nodded, chewing on his pen. "I don't know, man." He sighed. "I used to play drums in the band, and someone else was the singer, but I wrote lyrics and music and, like, guitar was my first love. I keep getting the itch to pick up the guitar again but I haven't played since I left Albuq-" He stopped himself from finishing the word "Albuquerque". He cleared his throat and continued, "Like is it even worth it? I'm not gonna be, like, famous with it."

"The point of making music isn't fame. Yes, I think all of us want listeners, want an audience. But first and foremost, we create for ourselves." Maglor put his hot chocolate down and folded his arms, thinking of the end of Jesse's song and how it could be salvaged. "If you made that into a slower ballad..."

"Oh, like some, uh, folk rock Neil Young type shit?" Jesse scratched his head. "Maybe I should get an acoustic guitar instead of an electric guitar -"

"I have some recommendations for guitar models if you do..."

"Aw sweet, you play?" Then Jesse said, "I mean, it seems obvious the way you talk about music, but with that hand and all..." His voice trailed off, aware that he probably put his foot in his mouth. "Shit man, I didn't mean -"

Maglor held up his bad hand. "It's fine. Yes, I can still play, even with my hand being like this."

"Uh... what happened, if you don't mind me asking?"

"War." It wasn't the full story, but it was the only story he'd allow people to know.

"What, you were like, in Iraq or some shit?"

Maglor said nothing, but resumed sipping his hot chocolate.

"Sorry, I shouldn't have asked." Jesse swallowed hard. "You say you've got guitar model recs?"

"I do but they're easier for me to make in-person if I know what the selection is."

Jesse thought for a moment. "You got, like, a day off anytime soon?"

"I close the shop on Mondays and take the day for myself."

"Monday afternoon, you wanna, like... go to the music store with me? Help me pick out a guitar?"

"Yes, we could do that."

—

They had gone to the music store and gotten lunch together. Jesse couldn't stay long, he had to go see his girlfriend, and it was just as well because the social call was still terribly awkward for Maglor, who preferred keeping to himself as much as possible.

But it still was something, a crumb of interaction in a deliberately lonely life.

Jesse came in a few days later with the acoustic guitar. "Thought you might like to hear this," he said.

He strummed and plucked slowly, and instead of the raspy, half-screamed vocals he'd delivered the trainwreck of a song in last week, he sang in a normal tenor, and his voice wasn't bad at all.

*Your eyes burn like daggers
Through the triumph of my will
Your hands they smell like gasoline
They cause my love to spill*

*Fallacies, fallacies
All my lies won't set me free
Fallacies, fallacies*

*At your heart's crystal palace
Is where I make my stand
The beast has come to get me
Chased me far from my homeland*

Fallacies, fallacies

*Run from you, dead like me
All my lies won't set me free
Fallacies, fallacies*

*Black is the color
You walk in beauty like the night
I wish I had something to offer
But all I have is blinded sight*

*War and conflict
Fallacies
Clowns and convicts
Fallacies
Planets dying
Fallacies
Shit multiplying
Fallacies
Popes and bankers
Fallacies
Spilling tankers
Fallacies
Excuse my attitude
Here comes the hammer!*

Maglor sat. Anything would have been better than the original "Fallacies", which was risible, but this... went above his expectations.

It hit a little too close to home. It hit a nerve, directly. *Sören*, he thought, trying to block out the memory of *Sören's* beauty. The Silmaril crystals... *Fëanor's* passion, and *Sören's* so much like it... *Fingolfin* standing against *Melkor*, the corrupted *Vala* swinging his mighty war hammer.

"You OK, man?" Jesse gave him a concerned look.

Maglor nodded. "I'm OK." *I will never be OK.*

"What did you think?" Jesse frowned. "You hated it, didn't you?"

"No, I didn't hate that at all. It was moving."

"Aw, really?" Jesse grinned. Then he frowned again. "I wrote it from, uh... experience." His frown deepened. "I've been trying to start my life over again, up here, but it means I have to - ah, fuck, I shouldn't be talking about this with you."

"If you're on the run from anyone or anything, no, you shouldn't be talking about this with *anyone*." Maglor met his eyes. "Protect yourself."

Jesse bought a copy of *The Return of the King*, and then he was gone, not saying a word.

—

May 2015

Maglor didn't expect to see him again, after that. He knew from his own experience that the first rule of running and hiding was that if someone else figured out you were running and hiding it was a good idea to not trust them and maintain a distance.

And yet, one afternoon Jesse did show up. Maglor was surprised, and even more surprised by the pretty Latina woman who came in the shop with him, the baby sling that Jesse was wearing.

"Hey," Jesse said, as if no time had passed at all.

"Hey yourself. Haven't seen you in awhile."

"Yeah, I've been busy."

"You know this guy?" the woman asked.

"Sort of? He encouraged me to write my songs again. Uh, Mark, this is my wife, Nikki. Nikki, this is Mark." He patted the mixed-race baby's head. "This is my daughter, Jane."

It was such a plain name for a girl to have, nowadays. No doubt there was a story behind it. Maglor wasn't going to ask. He smiled at the little family. "Well. Hello."

"We came to get some children's books. I mean, Jane is too young to read yet, but I can read to her, right? Get her off to a good start." He looked at Nikki, who smiled and nodded. "When she's old enough I think I want her to have music lessons too. That's important."

"Yes. Yes it is." Maglor got up from the counter and gestured for them to follow. "Right this way."

Bundin við hjarta þitt

Chapter Summary

Valentine's Day is approaching, and Nicolae Dooku wants to make it up to Sören for what happened last year around this time.

*Gen'ral's gathered in their masses,
Just like witches at black masses*

Nicolae Dooku turned up the volume and, even though he was the only one in the jeep, still threw the horns. He smiled to himself as his jeep made the turn into Svalbarðseyri, the village where he'd been living for close to a year, blasting Black Sabbath into the village streets. The picturesque little village was golden in the light of the setting February sun - it was only five in the afternoon. He was returning from a trip into Akureyri to go food shopping, which he would have done earlier, but he'd lost himself in his writing.

At seventy years old, Dooku was retired. He actually hadn't planned on being retired this early, working as a criminal defense barrister in London, but he moved to Iceland to be with the man he married. He knew going into it that he wouldn't be able to continue work in law - there was one lawyer for every three hundred people in the country. After taking some time to just relax, he found himself feeling restless, a storm he and his husband Sören had to weather together. But at last, the answer of "what now?" came to him as he spent more time at the library - necessarily, since he'd parted with most of his impressive book collection. Sören ran an art studio with classes open to the public, including classes for children, believing that everyone can and should make art of some kind, and when Dooku shared his vision Sören was intensely enthusiastic and supportive. That vision was to become a novelist, drawing on his background in law much as John Grisham had, but also drawing upon his personal background as a gay man with a transgender sister-in-law, tackling themes of social justice alongside conflicts of the heart.

And though he would have balked at the idea of writing "filthy smut" even a year ago, Dooku found himself spicing up his novel with sex scenes between the protagonist and his husband, based on his own sex life. Writing erotica didn't come naturally to him at first; indeed, he'd been celibate for most of his life, putting his career above everything until he met Sören. So to learn how to write erotica, he began reading it. He found that overall there was more bad erotica than good - he and Sören started to have a lot of fun together with dramatic readings of the worst gay male erotica on the Internet. But when it was good, it was very good, and learning from these examples on how to phrase things (just as he'd learned from the bad how *not* to phrase things), and writing about sex, had the very pleasant side effect of heating up his marriage. Not that he and Sören had been lacking in that department.

"Thunderstruck" by AC/DC started just as Dooku pulled into the driveway of the cabin, and he turned off the jeep with a reluctant sigh - he had perishables to put away, and had to get dinner started. He was greeted at the door by Snúður, their tuxedo cat, who chirped and began rubbing against him, headbutting his leg.

"Yes, you missed me, didn't you?" Dooku cooed as he reached down to stroke and skritch the cat. "I wasn't gone long but it felt like forever, didn't it? You little snugglepuff. Yes you

are. Yes you are."

He checked the status of Snúður's food and water - Snúður had eaten all the food given that morning, so he fed the cat again to keep him out of the way as he puttered around the kitchenette of their cabin, which boasted a wood stove, hot plate, slow cooker, mini-fridge, a sink, and a shelf unit that served as both a pantry and a space for cookware. The slow cooker got frequent use, so Dooku could just throw meals in and not worry about it as he spent the day writing or indulging other pastimes - he gardened and biked in warmer months, hiked year-round, went to the gym three times a week, and when not browsing books at the library, went there to play chess with the locals. Today, though, Sören had expressed interest in fish.

As Dooku prepared the batter for the fish, he put on the app he used for learning Icelandic. Even though everyone around here spoke English decently, Dooku still felt obligated to learn the language, and truth be told he liked the challenge of it, and thought it was a beautiful language. Sören's accent had become heavier since returning home after living in the UK for over two years, and Dooku found it incredibly sexy; Sören had lately taken to speaking Icelandic to him when they made love, which was a huge turn-on. The minutes wore on and Dooku knew Sören would be home soon, and even the mundane questions and answers in Icelandic - today, about grocery shopping, something he'd just done - had a strong effect on him, enough that he was getting hard thinking about Sören.

At the sound of Sören's jeep in the driveway, Dooku's heart raced with anticipation. Sören walked in, all smiles, taking off his black trenchcoat and gloves to hang on the rack near the door. Today he was wearing a Nine Inch Nails "Pretty Hate Machine" T-shirt over a long-sleeved black shirt, and his usual faded skinny jeans and black Doc Martens boots. His mop of dark curls was up in a messy man bun. When loose, his hair was down to his shoulders, having grown since moving back home; his beard was also fuller. Two pairs of small silver hoops in each ear and the sparkly black nail polish on his fingers glittered in the light from the fireplace. When Sören was in Reykjavik, he was frequently assumed to be a rocker of some kind, though that was technically his sister Margrét, who led a goth-punk band. The thirty-four-year-old wasn't a rock star, but here and now in the doorway of their cabin, he was a sex god as far as Dooku was concerned.

Dooku found himself slamming Sören against the wall in a deep, hungry kiss. Sören moaned into the kiss, arms wrapping around Dooku. "I missed you too," Sören husked before kissing him back, pulling him closer. At the feel of Dooku's hard-on pressed against him, Sören chuckled and said, "Wow, you *definitely* missed me."

Dooku kissed and licked down Sören's neck, his hard cock throbbing at the sound of Sören's breathy moans. Dooku nibbled Sören's ear, and whispered, "*Ég vil sjúga þig.*" He claimed Sören's full, soft lips once more, tongue swirling more slowly and deliberately this time, and drew Sören's lower lip between his teeth before growling, "*Ég er svangur að smakka þig.*"

"*Fuck, yes.*" Sören reached down to unbutton and unzip his jeans. Dooku reached down to help pull them down, and Sören's silky black boxer-briefs with them.

He took Sören's hard cock into his hand, stroking it slowly as they kissed again; Dooku hooked a possessive finger through the captive bead ring in the head, his thumb stroking the frenulum. He resumed kissing Sören's neck, and then at last got down on his knees before his husband, eyes locking as he took Sören's cock into his mouth inch by inch.

When his cock was halfway in, Sören groaned, running his fingers through Dooku's hair.

Dooku got to work, sucking hard, tongue lashing as he sucked. After a few minutes he focused on just the head, tongue working furiously on Sören's frenulum, one hand stroking the shaft, the other cupping and gently rubbing Sören's balls. Sören was trembling, gasping for breath, leaning against the wall for support, clutching Dooku's head as he gently thrust into his mouth. "*Sjúga mig,*" Sören rasped.

I love doing this to you, Dooku spoke into his mind, across their Force bond. *I love pleasing you.*

"God, you're fucking good at it," Sören gasped. "I'm gonna come soon."

"Mmmmmmmmm." Dooku took Sören's cock out of his mouth and began to lick the head, teasing him. Sören was leaking a lot of precum now, and Dooku lapped him hungrily, savoring the salty sweetness, eager for more. He pushed his tongue into Sören's foreskin as he took the head back into his mouth, swirling his tongue in the foreskin, and Sören threw his head back and cried out, knees buckling.

"Fuck..." Sören's hands were trembling as they held Dooku's head. "Nico... don't stop..."

Dooku worked his tongue faster, sucking harder, rubbing Sören's balls more firmly. Sören couldn't make words anymore, just animal noises, and Dooku reveled in it, loving the way Sören lost control. He couldn't resist one more round of teasing, gently tugging the Prince Albert piercing with his teeth before licking just the frenulum, giving a small, smug smile as Sören howled in a combination of pleasure and frustration.

"You fucking cocktease."

"I learned from you, my love." He lapped up more precum, and then took Sören's cock back in his mouth.

Sören fucked his mouth then, and Dooku found himself fumbling with his own trousers, consumed by pure sexual need. When Sören let go, screaming as he filled Dooku's mouth, the touch of his own hand brought him off instantly, moaning as he coated his hand with seed. In the Force, their pleasure wove together, flowing like water to water, shimmering, burning bright. Dooku rested his head against Sören's thigh, catching his breath.

Sören helped him up. Dooku brought his cum-soaked hand to Sören's mouth, who licked and sucked the fingers clean, and then licked his palm before planting a sweet, gentle kiss there. The look of love in Sören's dark eyes made Dooku's own mist, and the heat in Sören's gaze as those lips wrapped around his fingers and his tongue licked up the cum made Dooku feel a surge of randiness again, though he'd need time to recharge.

And it was time to start the fish already.

Dooku went to the bathroom and cleaned up to cook, and changed into his usual black silk pajamas. As he battered the fish, he stole glances at Sören taking his clothes off, admiring the rings in his nipples and the flame sleeve tattoo on one arm, the ocean waves on the other, leading to a design on his back of two phoenixes, one made of fire, one made of water. The phoenixes hid scars from physical abuse Sören had endured as a child, and were a metaphor for starting his life over again after trauma. Sören changed into a pair of blue plaid flannel pajamas, with matching blue bunny slippers, which would be horribly unsexy on anyone else, but somehow did not detract from his appeal at all. His hair was down now, and right after he sat down, Snúður hopped up beside him and batted at a lock. Sören laughed and scooped up the cat into his arms, stroking him with his free

hand; Snúður nuzzled him and began to knead, purring so loudly Dooku could hear him across the cabin. Dooku smiled as he threw the battered fish on the frying pan.

"How was work today?" Dooku asked.

"Oh, you know. The usual." Sören leaned down to kiss the top of his cat's head and nuzzle the fur, then leaned back in his chair. "One of the adult groups is making winter landscapes and the ceramics group is doing vases. The kids are making snow globes and I don't think I'll ever get the glitter out of the art room."

Dooku chuckled. "I hope you didn't track any into the house. Or get it in your clothes. It's a lot like sand - coarse, rough, and irritating."

"Jæja, no shit. Although more accurately, glitter is the herpes of craft supplies."

Dooku had taken that moment to drink water, and almost spat it out. Even after over a year of living with Sören's sense of humor, he still caught him off-guard. Sören grinned, satisfied by the older man's response.

"Speaking of," Sören said, "what's new in the land of gay male erotica? Anything brain bleach worthy?"

Dooku pinched the bridge of his nose, laughing and cringing at the same time. "I actually haven't visited that site today. I spent all day working on the chapter. Besides... you know I have more fun reading it when you're around."

"Someone to share your pain."

Dooku nodded solemnly. "After dinner we should see if the latest installment of *that horror* is up today."

"God."

They ate fish and chips together, ignoring Snúður's whines like he hadn't been fed in days, and then, cuddled up, Sören sketched and Dooku visited the erotica website. Sure enough, the latest chapter of *Secret Confessions Of A Cum Dumpster* was available - Dooku marveled that it had twenty chapters and was still going.

Dooku began to read the chapter aloud to Sören with as much serious dignity as he could muster, his RP basso making everything sound much more dramatic and important than it really was. He kept as much of a poker face as he could, but at the phrase "turgid nips" his composure cracked. And then, a few sentences later -

"I licked my lips at the sight of his drooling purple mushroom head."

"*Mushroom head?* What is this, Super Mario?" Sören cackled, and began humming the Super Mario theme song, which then turned into "bow chicka bow wow".

Dooku took a deep breath, forcing himself to go on. "I screamed as he began forcing his thick love pole into my poop chute. 'Oh yeah! Give me that man meat!' I shouted, *grindining* on him furiously. 'I love taking that *cork!* *Bread* me good!'"

Sören doubled over, laughing so hard he scared the cat. "Who... the fuck... *writes this...*"

"I wish I could say 'one random individual with no taste' but these turns of phrase and

typos are all too common. I don't know how anyone finds 'poop chute' arousing."

"Well..." Sören leaned in and nibbled on Dooku's jaw. "Anything sounds sexy when you say it."

"*Poop chute* does not sound sexy when I say it. It does not even sound sexy when *you* say it, and you know how I feel about your accent."

"*Hej elskan, þú vilt setja þinn kjöt stang í kúkur göng minni?*"

Dooku laughed and rolled his eyes. "Well, when you say it like that..."

Sören kissed him, laughing too. Sören's laugh was like an aphrodisiac to Dooku, lighting up his entire world; soon they forgot about the bad porn, kissing passionately, hands roaming, lost in each other. Sören dragged Dooku off the couch and to the bed.

They couldn't get their pajamas off quickly enough, and Sören used the Force to grab their lube from the bedtable. He climbed on top of Dooku and slowly worked lube over Dooku's cock as they resumed kissing. Now it was Sören's turn to kiss Dooku's neck, down to his chest, teasing the sensitive nipples with his tongue, sucking them hard.

"You are so delicious," Sören said, licking his chest hair.

Dooku groaned and stroked Sören's face, pet his curls. "I love you."

"I love you." Sören came up to kiss him, and then he impaled himself on Dooku's cock, taking it slowly. When Dooku was all the way inside, they sighed together, taking each other's hands.

Sören began to ride him slowly. Dooku loved the sight of him, watching his cock slide in and out of Sören's tight hole, watching Sören work his hips, his lithe, willowy, creamy body moving so fluidly, gracefully, like a dance. Sören liked looking at him too, running his fingers through Dooku's chest hair and over his six-pack abs; Dooku moaned at Sören's touch, all the right places.

Sören leaned down to kiss him. Then, before Sören could fully rise up again, Dooku sat up a little to lick Sören's nipple, playing with the captive bead ring with his tongue, giving a little tug with his teeth before suckling. Sören cried out, and Dooku playfully slapped Sören's ass, making him cry out again. He worked on the other nipple, licking fast then slow, sucking hard, his hand playing with the ring of the nipple he'd sucked previously, before turning his mouth back to it. Playing with one nipple ring as he licked and sucked on the other. When their mouths met again, Sören began riding him a little harder, faster, and Dooku growled into the kiss.

"*Ég elska þig svo mikið,*" Sören whispered, trailing kisses over his beard, then down his neck. "*Eiginmaður minn. Hjartað mitt. Sál mín.*"

Dooku gripped Sören's hips and started pounding away. Sören's nails dug into Dooku's sides, Sören panting "yes, yes, yes" as he bounced on Dooku's cock, riding him like a wild bull. The headboard slammed against the wall. Dooku's hands slid up from Sören's hips, over his stomach and chest, and back down. Sören was glistening with a fine sheen of sweat now, his cock dripping precum onto Dooku's stomach. Sören reached down and collected some of the precum with his fingers, pushing them into Dooku's mouth to taste. Dooku moaned, savoring the taste of his beloved, shivering with anticipation of the inevitable release.

Dooku's right hand stroked Sören's cock, and the left rubbed Sören's chest, plucking, rolling, and pinching his nipples, and enjoying the feel of the petal-soft skin, the muscles rippling as Sören rode him. He rubbed Sören's belly, and back up again, relishing every touch, every feel, every inch of the man he loved.

They were both so close now, but holding back, not wanting it to end. The mattress creaked underneath them, the wet slurping sound of their fuck and the slap of Dooku's balls against Sören's ass filled the cabin. Sören's sharp little cries and Dooku's deep grunts and groans, the shuddering gasps... all of it added to the heat, the need, the *hunger*, intensifying the pleasure of Sören's channel gripping and stroking his cock as he hit that magic spot inside him again and again.

Finally their eyes met, Sören's wild and almost feral. Tortured. "I need..." he whimpered.

A few thrusts, and then Dooku stroked Sören's cock hard and fast, his hand a blur. "Come with me, sweetheart."

"Nico." Sören let out a wordless howl, shooting all over Dooku's chest and stomach.

"Yes, Sören, yes my love..." Dooku roared as he spent into Sören, his toes curling, feeling Sören clench and pulse around him. Sören shot another arc of cum over him at the feel of Dooku coming inside him, and Dooku groaned, loving it when Sören came on him.

Sören collapsed onto Dooku's chest and they kissed, before Dooku pulled him close, smiling at the feel of Sören nuzzling his chest hair. Soon Sören was licking the cum off him, and kissed him again. If Dooku hadn't had such a shattering climax his cock would wake up again at the taste of Sören's cum in his mouth, but instead both men sighed happily and then Sören curled up on his shoulder, as Dooku fondly stroked his curls, gently rocking the younger man in his arms.

Sören drifted off into a nap, as he sometimes did after a powerful orgasm. Dooku thought about getting back on his laptop and working on more of the chapter, but he also felt lazy, warm and content, and enjoyed watching Sören rest, looking peaceful and ethereal. It was the cat who woke Sören up, climbing up on the bed and headbutting him. The sweet smile on Sören's face as he blinked his eyes open and reached out to skritch the cat warmed Dooku's heart.

"You know," Dooku said after watching Sören pet the cat for a moment, "you never did tell me the story of how you got him."

"It's not a terribly exciting story," Sören said.

"I'd still like to hear it."

"When I was staying with my cousin Ari last year, back when Margrét was in the UK for her lawsuit against Kylo Ren... one of Ari's yoga students died. She had a cat. Ari took in the cat with intent to rehome him, since he has a small apartment in Reykjavik and already has a cat. And I got attached. So when Margrét came back and had enough money to help me start over again, I took Snúður with me. He gave me a reason to keep going after my heart was broken from... all of that."

Dooku winced, and squeezed Sören's hand before bringing it to his lips, planting a kiss in the palm, and squeezing it again, resting the hand on his heart. "Letting you go was the biggest mistake I ever made in my life." He stroked Sören's face. "And coming back to

you was my best decision. Well... that and marrying you."

"And here I would have thought your best life decision was spending hours of your time reading about poop chutes and turgid nips and drooling purple mushroom heads."

Dooku pinched the bridge of his nose, shaking with silent laughter. "You know..."

"I know." Sören grinned.

Then Sören traced the one tattoo Dooku had, on his left wrist, which he'd gotten on their one-year anniversary in November. It was the *vegvísir*, an Icelandic magical stave intended to help the bearer find their way through rough weather - chosen for the symbolism of their love finding a way, against all odds. Dooku never thought in a million years he'd ever do something like that to his own body - he'd come of age during the hippie era and though he grew a beard, he kept his hair short and was a "square", silently disapproving of the counterculture. Now he had gotten a tattoo just before his seventieth birthday. And here he was working on a career change, writing *erotica*. Openly gay, married to another man, after being so closeted and afraid of repercussions on his career that he'd refrained from relationships all his life. Sometimes his life felt surreal, like he was having a really great sex dream he didn't want to wake up from.

But the pain of their three months apart had been all too real. And still lingered, even though they'd been married since September. Dooku looked at the calendar hanging above his small workspace in the cabin. They had broken up shortly after Valentine's Day, and Valentine's Day was *soon*. Three days' time, in fact.

"I want to make it up to you," Dooku said, stroking Sören's face.

"Oh, Nico." Sören smiled, and kissed the tip of his nose. Then he laughed softly. "We've already had all the makeup sex. Not that I'll turn down more..."

"I know Valentine's Day isn't a big deal in Iceland, but I still want to do something special to show you how much I care."

"You show me every day."

Dooku narrowed his eyes. "Will you just let me fucking spoil you."

Sören pressed his hand to his forehead and made an exaggerated sigh. "Oh, *all right*." Dooku glowered, and Sören laughed louder. "You're so cute when you make that face."

"*I am not cute*."

"Hi Not Cute, I'm -"

Using the Force, Dooku hit Sören with a pillow. Sören got a mock indignant look on his face, and then he also used the Force to throw a pillow. Dooku dodged, and then grabbed Sören and tickled him. Sören shrieked and tried to tickle him back. Snúður got between them, jealous that they weren't petting him anymore, and the two resumed petting him, talking baby talk to the cat, who looked almost smug as he curled up, purring loudly.

"You're still cute," Sören said, and booped Dooku's nose.

The next day, Dooku got an early start on his chapter. A roast, potatoes and vegetables simmered in the slow cooker, and Dooku intended to have a productive writing day. But by noon, he needed a break. He went for a walk, the crisp February air invigorating him - though he was in great shape for his age, as a Force sensitive and a physically active man who took care of himself, he had occasional joint pain back in the UK, and over the last few months he felt better than he had in years. He'd been worried enough about his mortality a year ago to break up with Sören, not wanting to condemn him to life with an old man dying. Now he felt like he had at least another twenty years left, if not more, and he intended on living them to the fullest. If there wasn't so much snow on the ground he would have liked to go for a motorcycle ride.

But eventually he came in from the cold, and put on tea to warm his bones. As he drank tea he reviewed the latest offerings on the erotica website. One title in particular - *Making It Up To You* - stood out at him, almost like it was meant for him to read. Dooku clicked on it, and spent the next hour reading a story about two star-crossed lovers who broke up based on a misunderstanding, got back together, and as an act of demonstrating trust, one partner consented to be tied up.

Dooku found it fascinating, though the idea of being tied up appealed to him less than the thought of tying Sören up. Fantasies flashed through his mind. He thought of spanking Sören as "punishment" for all of the jokes, especially the dad jokes. Then tenderness, after being rough. *"Let me take care of you."* Spoiling him, kissing and licking every inch of his body. Teasing him. The look of trust in Sören's eyes as at last he was taken, filled, yielding, surrendering. Taking the anniversary of when things went sour and making it sweet. Making it right.

Dooku went hard at the thought of Sören tied, teased, trembling, begging for it. He pulled out his smartphone - Sören had finally gotten him to replace his damn flip phone, and taught him how to use the infernal contraption. He took a picture of his hard, dripping cock, and texted it to Sören with the message *thinking of you*.

Two minutes later Sören texted back: *oh myyyyyyy. I'll have to go in the bathroom to keep people from seeing this.*

Dooku texted a reply. *Whatever shall I do with this?*

Sören was quick to respond. *Show me what a dirty slut you are.*

Dooku groaned; he loved it when Sören talked to him like this. He stroked himself thinking about Sören, and just before he could climax, he shot a short video of his cock spurting, and sent it to his husband.

I am climbing the fucking walls right now, Sören texted back.

He didn't have any late afternoon or evening classes, and as soon as Sören got home he found Dooku naked in bed, waiting for him, propped up on one elbow, hard again. Sören stripped as fast as he could, leaving a trail of clothes to the bed. He wasted no time getting Dooku's cock in his mouth, then rimmed him like he was starving for it, Dooku arching and moaning, thrusting against his husband's face. Sören lubed him up, and then, with Dooku on his back, Sören slid into him, the two of them kissing as they were joined, body and soul. That was where the gentleness ended, Sören pounding him into the mattress with Dooku's legs on his shoulders, watching as Dooku stroked himself again, coming as Dooku came on him.

They curled up together, Dooku laughing as he felt Sören's cum leaking out of him. "I'll have to go to the laundromat tomorrow," he lamented.

Sören patted him. "It could be worse. At least it's not blood. Or other stuff."

Dooku cringed. "As I discover the world of erotica, I find myself grateful you're not into certain activities."

"No."

Now seemed like an opportune time to broach the subject of his earlier fantasy.

"Although..." Dooku propped himself up on the pillows. "What do you think about things like being tied up once in awhile?"

"Like some *Fifty Shades* shit?"

"No, not like *Fifty Shades of Grey*. For starters, we have a healthy relationship, and this would be explicitly consensual."

Sören snickered. "Awww, and here I was hoping I could say 'my inner goddess is turning cartwheels right now' or something equally cheesy."

Dooku facepalmed. "Dear *god*."

"So..." Sören's fingers walked over Dooku's chest, idly playing with the chest hair. "Do you mean like a full-time master-slave thing, expecting me to wear a collar and kneel and all that, or do you just mean occasional kinky fuckery?"

Dooku rolled his eyes at the "kinky fuckery" reference. "I definitely mean occasional. A bit of fun once in awhile, to spice things up. Not for all the time."

Sören nodded. "I think we could try it."

"Would you like to try it soon? For example, part of our romantic evening for Valentine's Day?"

"What did you have in mind?"

"Spanking you for being such a brat. Then tying you up." Their eyes met, and Dooku waited.

Sören was quiet, and looking serious, considering. Finally, he gave a slow nod. "I think I could get into that."

"Good." Dooku kissed him softly, and Sören kissed him back harder.

Then Sören cackled. "Look at you, taking a walk on the wild side." He grinned. "I like it."

"That makes two of us." Then he rolled Sören onto his back, nibbling his neck with a growl.

Valentine's Day 2019 fell on a Thursday, and Sören still had classes to teach. Their plan was for Dooku to pick Sören up at Logifugl Listaskóli, and the two would go to an early dinner and proceed from there.

Though they were going to a more casual establishment - Serrano, the Mexican restaurant where they'd eaten the night that they fucked for the first time - Dooku still wanted to look elegant for his husband, so he opted on a flowing brown cape over a black tunic and trousers. He arrived at Logifugl Listaskóli just as Sören's last class was finishing up, schoolchildren working on snow globes. The parking lot was full of parents waiting for their kids, most of whom by now recognized Dooku and greeted him on his way in.

Sören was wearing a black button-down shirt and black trousers, and had taken caution to wear an apron over his good clothes to avoid getting paint or glitter on it; even in a grey apron stained with paint, Sören still looked sexy to him.

A twin brother and sister pair, around nine or ten years old, whose mother had called earlier to let Sören know she'd be a little late, were staying behind and helping Sören clean up the art room. Dooku also helped them, with Sören giving the children instructions in Icelandic.

Finally the girl paused, staring at Dooku. She shifted her weight from one foot to the other, obviously a little nervous, and then she said, "I'm learning English. Can I practice?"

"Yes, milady," Dooku said, restraining the urge to correct her with *May I practice*.

The girl proceeded to talk about her dog, and showed him the snow globe she'd been making, and told him her mother was a nurse and this was "very 'portant."

"Important," her brother corrected.

"It's *important* but it's really..." She wrinkled her nose, searching for the right word. "It's gross. She pokes people with needles a lot and sees a lot of blood."

"I... see." Dooku frowned slightly.

Then the girl said, "Maybe I shouldn't be telling you about blood."

"It's fine," Dooku said, though it wasn't really the sort of thing he wanted to discuss before a meal.

Then the girl blinked and said, "But are you Count Dracula? You look like Dracula, but really old."

Across the art room, Sören was trying very hard not to laugh, and failing, shaking with silent laughter, his face flushed, eyes shining. Dooku glared at his husband, and then he said to the girl, as solemnly as he could, "I am not a vampire."

"Of *course* he's not a vampire," her brother scolded. Dooku expected him to say something like "vampires aren't real", but instead he said, "He doesn't even sparkle."

Sören snorted, and immediately covered his face, shaking harder at the look of exasperation on Dooku's face. Dooku tried to mask it, and he was grateful when the children's mother showed up in her nursing scrubs, thanking Sören profusely for staying with them.

"Bye," Sören said, in English, for the benefit of Dooku. "Be safe driving in that *twilight*."

When they were out of earshot, Dooku huffed, "You know..."

Sören beamed. "I know."

Sören took off his apron on the way out, and they got in the jeep. "Whatever are they teaching children these days?" Dooku complained as they rolled out. "Vampires. Do. Not. *Sparkle*."

"Edward Cullen does."

"Why. *Why*."

Sören's response was to turn on the music. "A Whole Lotta Love" by Led Zeppelin was just ending, and then "Bohemian Rhapsody" began. Sören and Dooku looked at each other, and Sören began singing along.

Sören sang by himself until the middle of the song, when Dooku took over, in his rich bass-baritone, gesturing imperiously like he was in an opera.

*I see a little silhouetto of a man,
Scaramouche, Scaramouche, will you do the Fandango?
Thunderbolt and lightning,
Very, very frightening me.*

Sören sang in falsetto:

*(Galileo) Galileo.
(Galileo) Galileo,
Galileo Figaro*

They sang *Magnifico-o-o-o-o* together and then traded off, in Dooku's deep voice and Sören's tenor:

*I'm just a poor boy, nobody loves me.
He's just a poor boy from a poor family,
Spare him his life from this monstrosity.*

*Easy come, easy go, will you let me go?
Bismillah! No, we will not let you go. (Let him go!)
Bismillah! We will not let you go. (Let him go!)
Bismillah! We will not let you go. (Let me go!)
Will not let you go. (Let me go!)
Never let you go (Never, never, never, never let me go)
Oh oh oh oh
No, no, no, no, no, no, no
Oh, mama mia, mama mia (Mama mia, let me go.)
Beelzebub has a devil put aside for me, for me, for me.*

They headbanged together as they pulled into the parking lot of the restaurant, and waited until the song was over, swaying together, with Sören taking out a lighter, flicking it on and waving it.

Sören put an arm around him as they walked into the restaurant; Dooku not-so-discreetly grabbed his husband's ass, making Sören give him a playful swat, giggling.

"You used to be such a gentleman," Sören mock-scolded.

"I still am a gentleman, most of the time." Dooku smiled over his menu. "*Most of the time.*"

"But not tonight, I see."

"I will neither be a gentleman nor a gentle man, later."

"Good."

Dinner was fairly straightforward, and then Dooku drove them to the Nature Baths at Lake Mývatn, where they'd gone the night they'd fucked for the first time, and had been a few times since Dooku moved to Iceland. Dooku was still a bit self-conscious about having to shower naked in public, but not enough to keep him from his objective. Dooku and Sören waded into the hot spring and were served ice-cold beer, cuddling up together as they enjoyed the heat of the water and the sea of stars draped over them.

And then, just as had happened on that magical night in 2017, the aurora glowed in the night sky, shimmering green with bands of violet, magenta, aqua and gold. Dooku and Sören both broke out in gooseflesh, watching in awe for a few moments before they looked into each other's eyes and kissed, just as they had that night. Dooku's hands traced the phoenix tattoos on Sören's back, and Sören's fingers traced the *vegvisir* on his wrist.

"*Ég elska þig þar til andinn minn fer frá þessum heimi;*" Dooku told him, stroking his face, his curls, wanting this moment to never end.

"*Sál mín mun finna ykkur yfir allt rými og tíma.*"

They kissed again, more deeply, more hungrily. Then they nuzzled, their foreheads close, breathing each other's breath, their palms and fingertips touching, feeling the Force flowing between them, almost as if they were inside the aurora, the aurora singing their souls. In that moment they could feel something greater than themselves, like the aurora was a door to other worlds than these, and in all of those worlds, some way, somehow, they were together.

"*Ég er þitt og þú ert mín,*" Dooku said, kissing his hands, pressing them to his heart.

They looked up at the aurora again, tears falling silently; quiet, electric joy.

On the drive back to their cabin in Svalbarðseyri, the Northern Lights continued to play in the sky. Sören put on Cocteau Twins, which seemed the right kind of ambiance. Even though Dooku was eager for what would happen when they got back to the cabin, he was also in no rush to get back, savoring the beauty of the night, feeling the Force as strongly as he ever had, everything so *alive*.

—

They were naked now, and stood in front of the bed, admiring each other in the golden

glow of the fireplace. Dooku took a step forward - suddenly feeling almost bashful, as if he were making love for the first time all over again - and he stroked Sören's face as they kissed.

They just kissed for a moment, hard cocks rubbing together, holding each other tight. When they pulled apart, Dooku looked into Sören's eyes and said, "Are you absolutely sure you want to do this?"

Sören nodded. "Absolutely."

"I don't want you to just go along with it because you feel you have to in order to make me happy -"

"Nico. I want to try this, too." Sören grinned, and then let him feel his enthusiasm across their Force bond, which he'd been holding in check all day, not wanting to get too worked up around his students or out in public.

"All right." Dooku nodded. "It seems we should have a safeword, just in case something happens that you don't like."

"OK."

"Red for stop, yellow for slow down, green for go?"

"Sounds fine to me."

"Good." They kissed again, and then Dooku grabbed a handful of Sören's hair and ground out, "You're overdue for going over my knee, brat."

"Mmmmmmm."

Dooku sat on the edge of the bed and yanked Sören down across his lap. He admired the curve of Sören's bubble butt, taking a moment to caress it. "I'm going to give you twenty-five spankings. Safeword if you need it."

"God, yes."

Dooku knew Sören responded favorably to the occasional ass slap when they had sex, but the way Sören was grinding against him now in anticipation was something else entirely. Dooku's hand struck Sören's ass, hard. "One."

"*Fuck.*" Sören was already breathing harder.

Slap. "Two." *Slap.* "Three."

"Mmmmmmm...."

"Such a brat that you *enjoy* this, don't you?"

"Yes."

Slap. "Four." *Slap.* "Five. You naughty boy."

"Very naughty." Sören wiggled his ass provocatively, grinding against Dooku's thigh some more. "I've been so bad..."

Slap. "Six." *Slap.* "Seven."

"So bad..."

Slap. "Eight. So depraved." *Slap.* "Nine." *Slap.* "Ten." He slapped harder for the eleventh, and Sören cried out.

"Are you all right?" Dooku asked, mildly concerned, watching the red handprint bloom.

"Green. Fucking *green.*"

Dooku smiled to himself, and slapped Sören's ass again.

"Twelve." *Slap.* "Thirteen." *Slap.* "Fourteen. My... you have such a lovely arse, and it looks even lovelier when I can see where I've been."

"God, yes. Green. *Green.*"

Slap. "Fifteen." *Slap.* "Sixteen." Another very hard slap. "Seventeen."

"More..."

He gave Sören what he wanted, slapping his ass harder, aroused at the sight of Sören opening to him, presenting, wanting this as badly as he did if not more.

"Eighteen." *Slap.* "Nineteen."

Sören whimpered, digging his nails into Dooku's other thigh, rubbing harder against him; Dooku could feel Sören's cock leaking precum.

Slap. "Twenty." *Slap.* "Twenty-one. You are like an animal in heat, aren't you?"

"Yes..."

Slap. "Twenty-two. Brat." *Slap.* "Twenty-three. Naughty, naughty brat."

"I'm your brat..."

Slap. "Twenty-four." One last, intense slap, the hardest he could give. "Twenty-five."

Sören was trembling, and Dooku gave him a moment before tenderly rubbing Sören's red ass. He helped Sören climb onto the bed, and then he used the Force to bring over a salve he'd bought yesterday in anticipation. He cradled Sören close, petting him with one hand, rubbing salve onto his ass with the other, as Sören nuzzled him with a glazed look in his eyes as if he was high, smiling euphorically.

"It's time to take care of you now," Dooku said when he was finished with the salve.

Sören nodded.

They had agreed to just tie Sören's wrists and not his ankles. Dooku produced two black silk scarves he'd bought for this evening, and with the Force, he tied Sören's wrists tight to the headboard. Once Sören was securely tied, Dooku leaned in and gave him a sweet, lingering kiss.

Sören looked into his eyes and husked, "*Ég treysti þér.*"

Across their Force bond, Dooku could feel he meant it, and those words were more precious to him than gold. After the pain he'd caused a year ago, even after the work he'd done to rebuild trust... here, now, was closing whatever remaining wounds there were. They kissed again, and again.

Dooku began his work, kissing down his husband's neck, then making love to his nipples, licking, suckling, nibbling, playing with the nipple rings, spending a good twenty minutes just on Sören's nipples, delighting in the way they pebbled, the way Sören arched and moaned, writhing, whimpering.

He kissed and licked Sören's stomach, and sucked and nibbled on Sören's hip, kissing and caressing a thigh, a calf, then back up the other leg, the other hip. He hovered over Sören's wild, dark curly bush, breathing in his scent, before burying his nose in it, nuzzling, licking. He took Sören's cock in his mouth, sucking slowly, his eyes watching Sören's reactions, his own cock throbbing with each moan and sigh.

He took Sören's cock out of his mouth to lick up and down the shaft, and then just swirled his tongue all over the head, driving Sören even crazier when his tongue rubbed the prominent frenulum. He licked Sören's balls, and the sensitive place between balls and ass, and then he pushed his tongue inside Sören and licked very, very slowly.

He lost all track of time down there, eating Sören's ass as long as he could, slowly, then faster, faster, working his tongue like a hurricane, edging Sören to the brink of climax just to slow down again before Sören could lose control and come. He edged Sören like that again and again, slow then fast then slow, until Sören was almost sobbing in his need, shaking, his cock leaking so much precum it was dripping onto his stomach and down his thighs. Dooku relented just a little, lapping up the precum, before coming up to kiss Sören, sharing his taste with him.

Dooku slipped two lubricated fingers into Sören's channel, pressing and rubbing the prostate. He looked into Sören's eyes. "You want me inside you, sweetheart?"

"More than anything in the world."

Their eyes still locked, Dooku poured lube over his own cock - he enjoyed the way Sören's eyes riveted on him, going even crazier, and Dooku made a bit of a display of it, stroking himself, moaning with pleasure, letting precum drip down his cock.

"You're sure you want this?" Dooku couldn't resist continuing to tease.

"If you don't fuck me right fucking now, I swear when you untie me I'm going to... like... tie *you* up and subject you to one of those 10 hour Rickrolls or something."

A pause. Then Dooku said, his tone dry even as his eyes smiled, "Hello there, I'm going to, like, tie you up and subject you to one of those 10 hour Rickrolls or something, I'm -"

"FUCK. YOU."

Dooku's laughter rang out. "You know, I don't have to give you this cock. I can just pleasure myself..." He resumed stroking.

Sören *screeched*, and Dooku laughed again. "You poor dear," he teased.

"Ion Nicolae Dooku. *Fuck me right now.*"

Dooku laughed, and made an exaggerated sigh. "I *suppose*."

The head of Dooku's cock pushed against Sören's opening, and he slid in just the tip. And then back out. Just the tip. And out again. It was teasing them both - every nerve ending in Dooku's body was screaming to plow Sören into next week - but he reveled in the way Sören whined and writhed, almost feral in his lust.

Finally Dooku relented, pushing all the way in. They both cried out, and Dooku just rested there, lest they both come too soon. When he started moving, he went slowly, keeping them both under his control. His hands caressed the length of Sören's body up and down, slow and sensual, in time with his thrusts. It all felt fluid, liquid, languorous, even as the intensity was building, both of them exquisitely sensitized from all the buildup.

When Dooku gave in to his passion, driving into Sören fast and furious, Sören met his thrusts, bucking against him, screaming wildly. Dooku grunted, completely overcome by lust for Sören's body, and the feeling of love and trust between them. The past was so far away now, these moments, their *need* was all that existed, primal, white-hot, searing them into their souls. The slap of Dooku's balls against Sören's ass and the wet suctioning sound of his cock pumping in and out of Sören's ass was almost as loud as Sören's cries, the bed rocking violently against the wall, the cabin shaking. Dooku was glad there was a walk between the cabin and their nearest neighbors, though something told him they could probably still hear some of it. His hand reached to stroke Sören's cock in time with his thrusts, so fast and hard Sören's cock rattled in his hand.

Their eyes met again, and Dooku could feel it, like a jolt of electricity between them. Sören's breath caught, and then he gasped out "Nico..."

"Yes, love."

"*Nico!*" An arc of cum blasted out of Sören's cock, over Dooku's chest. "Oh, fuck... *FUCK!*"

Dooku gave a shout as his climax hit. He kept thrusting, Sören's channel milking him for all it was worth.

"Fuck... that's it, breed my arse..." Sören panted.

Those words made Dooku's orgasm even hotter, his climax throbbing hard, feeling himself shoot into Sören again. Sören's cock let out another jet of cum, and Dooku throbbed again at the cum painting his chest and abs. He collapsed onto Sören with a groan, and Sören sighed deeply as he continued cresting.

Dooku rested for a moment before using the Force to untie Sören's wrists. Sören flexed his wrists and Dooku gave him a concerned look. Sören nodded and said, "A little sore, but OK." He wrapped his arms around Dooku and squeezed him tight. "Thank you. That was fucking *amazing*."

"Thank *you*." Dooku looked into his eyes, stroking Sören's face before kissing him. "I love you so very much."

"I love you." Sören took his hand and kissed it. "This has been one of the best nights of my life."

"Same here." Dooku kissed his nose. "There will be many more, as we grow old

together."

Snuggled in each other's arms, legs entwined, they fell asleep.

In the morning, Dooku was awakened by the sound of "Never Gonna Give You Up" by Rick Astley.

Flash The Message, Something's Out There

Chapter Summary

In Toronto in 2019, Dagnýr Sigurðsson gives a TED Talk about the possibility that Earth has had visitors from elsewhere.

He knows more about his subject matter than he thinks he does.

2019

Toronto, Ontario, Canada

Dagnýr Sigurðsson swallowed hard as he looked out at the audience, gathered in this auditorium for his first TED Talk, here in Convocation Hall at the University of Toronto, where he taught physics.

He'd spent the last fifteen years conducting research, constructing theories, writing articles. He'd given a handful of interviews, including a guest spot on Neil Degrasse Tyson's talk show. He was one of the scientists who helped test and develop the Large Hadron Collider. His doctoral advisor had Stephen Hawking as a doctoral advisor. He was one of the most well-known theoretical astrophysicists of the 21st century, who had a lot to say about string theory, dark matter, emergence, and the theory of everything.

But here, underneath the spotlight, in a grey Brooks Brothers suit and tie, wearing wire-rimmed glasses, a headset with mic in his ear, over fifteen hundred people here for the privilege of watching him talk about his life's work, he felt like an impostor. He'd escaped the abuse he'd grown up with at age fourteen, when he was accepted to Oxford, a child prodigy, earning his doctorate at the age of twenty, and a post-doctorate at twenty-five. He was thirty-four now, almost thirty-five. And yet, sometimes he was reliving it like it was yesterday. He could hear his uncle Einar's voice in the back of his head as he looked at the crowd. *You are good for nothing. All you do is hide behind your books, but what use is it in the real world? Who gives a shit about any of it?*

His friend and colleague, the calculus professor Edmund Billingsley, had a front-row seat. The old man smiled at him, eyes crinkling. The words of Einar were replaced by encouragement Edmund had once given him when he was struggling with falling down another "rabbit hole" of research, feeling like the more he learned, the more it was apparent he didn't know much at all, and voiced the same "what does any of this even matter" in his frustration. *What you are doing with this is important. You may not be curing cancer or pulling children from a burning building or inventing a better electric car. But your work is important in another way. It reminds us of mystery. Adventure. Wonder. Without it, the spark of life dies.*

Wonder. Dagnýr had felt that as a child, looking up at all the stars in the pristine night skies of Akureyri, wondering what was out there. Wondering if anyone had come from those stars to Earth.

It was his oldest curiosity, and one he still hadn't tired of, three decades later. As unscientific as it was to think so, he could feel it in his *blood*, that something was out there. He didn't know what. He might never know. But he would learn all he could, while he

could.

He looked back at the sea of stars that was his audience, the sparks of life that he would feed now, with his words. The screen behind him showed the famous Pale Blue Dot photo, made popular by the late Carl Sagan, who Dagnýr thought of as a spiritual ancestor, though he was agnostic.



It was time. He took a deep breath.

"Here we are," he said, "all alone in the solar system. As far as we currently know, all alone in the galaxy. All alone in *any* galaxy.

"But do we know that for a fact? Are we, in fact, alone?"

"Carl Sagan had said that of billions and billions of stars -" He smiled, and so did several dozen people in the audience. "-the possible number of advanced civilizations capable of interstellar travel was about one million, max. Any civilization wishing to check on all the others would have to launch 10,000 ships annually, which is... a lot of spaceships."

He'd had his memelord brother Sören quickly whip up bad MS Paint doodles for a slideshow for some of the presentation; his audience knew to expect occasional moments of humor.

ALOT OF SPACESHIPS



[The Alot from the old *Hyperbole and a Half* blog](#), covered in spaceships, was on the screen behind him, captioned ALOT OF SPACESHIPS. Laughter and a few groans from the audience; Dagnýr smiled genuinely now, relaxing.

"But would they need to check on *all* the civilizations? And would they have to launch any ships at all? Maybe we're thinking about these highly advanced civilizations, spacefaring, the wrong way. Maybe they are using quantum fields to travel, maybe even pockets of dark matter.

"Tonight, I'll be challenging what you think you know about the concept of life on other worlds. No pseudoscience of UFOs - no need to fly at all. Why fly, when you can just walk through a door?

"Tonight, I'll be challenging what you think you know about the concept of the universe itself. Are we in a universe, singular, or are we in a multiverse, plural?

"We may not be as alone as we think we are. Is that comforting? Not really. Terrifying, harrowing. But just like primitive humans had to conquer their fear of fire, and harness it to survive - we must continue to face that which we do not understand. And in that, science fiction truly is accurate - space is the final frontier."

—

First Age

Underneath the open stars, in the glow of the campfire, Finrod plucked his harp. He smiled as he heard Balan sing - his Sindarin was less clumsy as the years passed.

Finrod played and Balan sang for awhile, and then, they enjoyed the peace and quiet, with Finrod resting his head on Balan's shoulder. He sighed as the Man began to play with his long waves of golden hair, tenderly rubbing his scalp. He lifted his face to nuzzle

the Man's grizzly beard, and his hand took Balan's free one, squeezing.

"Do you miss it?" Balan asked, speaking language of Men, breaking the silence.

"Miss what?"

"Home." Balan's face tilted, looking Finrod in the eyes. "Where you're from."

"Sometimes." Finrod nodded. "This is my life now, I accept that."

"But surely you must regret the exile..."

"I regret many things. But one action leads to another, and to change one is to change the other... and sometimes, changes unseen, unknown. If a butterfly flaps its wings in East Beleriand, there is a storm in West Beleriand. I miss the days of old, aye. I would also miss *you*." Finrod pressed a kiss to Balan's forehead. "And I would miss getting to know your people. Learning from them, about them, a whole new world to discover. In the lifespans my people live, you do not know how good it is to finally have something new, something unknown to get to know. It is good to share of my own people, who Men had not seen before, and experience who we are through new eyes."

"These eyes find you beautiful." Balan smiled, and kissed Finrod's mouth, with Finrod kissing him back. Sweet and gentle, like the kiss of rain, or soft starlight.

For now.

"My eyes find you beautiful, as well." Finrod's fingers trailed from Balan's beard, to his chest hair. "You are primal. Wild. Raw nature."

"We could have been wilder." Balan chuckled. "You were smart to play harp and sing to us when you found us, or we would have drawn weapons on you."

"I too could have attacked you, with spells. I took the chance of peace. That, I do not regret."

"I'd still like to take you captive." Balan's voice was rough before he nipped Finrod's lower lip with his teeth, then kissed and licked his neck how he knew the Elf liked it, making him moan and shiver. The graze of Balan's teeth on his neck, a nibble, and Finrod cried out, melting in his hands.

"Please..." Finrod panted.

Balan pushed Finrod to his back. With the dagger at his belt, he cut the fine silk robes from Finrod's body, caressing the exposed creamy flesh, trailing the blade against it. Finrod arched to him, cock throbbing at the look in Balan's eyes, the bite of the knife's edge - not cutting him. Just enough to let him know he could, and he would not.

"So beautiful." Balan leaned down to kiss him, and they both reached together for the vial of oil in their bag of supplies.

"Please, now." Finrod was in heat for it, needing this Man inside him, to fill the hollow, to know and be known.

Balan readied them both, and slid inside. He pinned Finrod's wrists to the ground, kissing him hard as he plowed him, fast and feverish. Finrod rocked his hips back at Balan,

writhing underneath him. "Ai, Balan," he cried. "Just like that..."

Before they could explode together, Balan slowed down, the way Finrod had taught him. The way Finrod had taken him after Balan had nightmares of a time before his arrival. Balan kept his thrusts achingly slow, kissed and stroked every part of Finrod that he could reach, until Finrod was sobbing, begging. Until they were both almost sobbing, feeling as if they would break, explode from the heat of their passion, the all-consuming need. It went on and on, flame burning hotter and hotter, the dance of pleasure and pain, nothing else in the world existing but this. Then they shattered, and all was the stars.

Balan became Bëor the Old, and in his ninety-third year, he died. Finrod was there until the end, loving him until his final breath. He had flowers planted on Bëor's grave.

When Finrod himself died, he was pardoned by the Valar, due to his many noble deeds. For a time, he lived in Valinor with Amarië, a woman he loved. But his soul grew sick for the loss of his love, Bëor *ever Balan in my heart* And as time went on, the Valar judged him.

"I have sinned," Finrod said. "I still sin, in my heart. It is what I am. My kin should not be judged for what we cannot help."

The life was drained from him, a sharp stabbing pain though no wound was made. With his dying breath, he cried out to his blood, scattered in the Void like the stars in the sea of space, but in the Void there were curses woven into the threads of fate, the secret blooded darkness that the Valar tried to conceal with their light. *I will find you. You will not bear this judgment alone, Fëanor. You were right about the Valar all along. I will help you.*

He was returning to the realm of Men. The years came undone, the memories stripped away into the blank slate of mortal flesh.

—

2019

"Ultimately, we can't prove any of this... it's why it's called theoretical astrophysics. The only thing I know for certain, here, is that we really don't know much of anything at all. Indeed, future generations - with more information, better technology - still won't know everything, or even much more than we've learned to date.

"What I do know is that I am willing to be wrong about everything I just said, I am willing to look like a fool, if someone is willing to *prove* me wrong. Because the future of humanity, here on this pale blue dot, is such that until and unless we can prove these doors exist, and open them... we are still alone. There is dark matter, but the greater darkness is closer to home. It's inside all of us.

"And it is only by being willing to keep delving into that darkness - to learn more, about the nature of reality, the nature of ourselves... *that* is what preserves this world. That is what has taken us from the caves to the skies. That is the poetry of the starstuff that we are all made of. The willingness to light that fire within, to face the fear of the unknown, and find the truth, however it hurts. However it may break the world that we know, however it may break *us*, ourselves. Knowledge is power, and it is only in breaking what *wethink* is our reality, and go deeper... that the pieces fall together as they should. As they *must*, for our continued survival. Thank you."

There was a standing ovation, which Dagnýr was not expecting. He smiled, took a small

bow, and waited until it was polite to exit the stage.

His husband Matt was waiting there for him, arms instantly around him, his fortress. "You did great," Matt said. "I can't wait to see it on YouTube."

"Oh god it's gonna be on YouTube." He knew that beforehand, of course, but now it was a wrap, and it felt different, a fresh surge of anxiety.

Anxiety, and relief that he'd just done it. He hadn't choked. He hadn't failed. Dagnýr nuzzled Matt's beard, as Matt stroked Dagnýr's clean-shaven chin. "You did it," Matt said, sensing the flood of emotion. "You did it. You *rocked the house*."

There was a small afterparty. Edmund strolled up to him at the snack table. "That was most excellent."

"Thank you."

"I'm proud of you," Edmund said, the closest Dagnýr had ever come to receiving praise from a father figure.

Dagnýr found himself hugging the old man, not caring how unprofessional it looked.

—

Edmund Billingsley got back to his house late; his cats and dog had been keeping vigil. He chuckled as he walked in. "I'm here, you silly beasts," he teased.

He gave them the obligatory affection, and then he dipped into his closet, inside the clothing rack he kept close to the door to fool anyone who might ever have occasion to be in his room, opening that door - you never know. He rose up and approached the altar table, opening the hollow book, unwrapping the *palantir*. He'd felt her weight at the edge of his consciousness throughout the TED Talk, politely holding back as he sent the confidence spell, not wanting his friend to choke at one of the most important moments of his career.

The mists swirled, and there she was, in Valinor. *Mithrandir*.

"Galadriel."

How is my brother.

"He is well." Olórin nodded. "As well as can be expected, considering."

He still does not know.

"Not yet. It is not time."

And yet the darkness draws nearer.

"It does. But it will be time... when it is time." Olórin's eyes looked up, saw into the distance, saw Matt chatting on the Internet with a woman named Nicole. "He has children on the way." *I will pretend to act surprised when he tells me.*

Galadriel's eyes widened. *Is that wise, with what is to come?*

"I think that even as he does not know, something in his heart knows, and he is following that. It is perhaps precisely with what is to come, that he is doing what he is doing, now. A light of hope."

I would ask that when he knows in full... give him my love. And words unspoken - Olórin saw a private moment where she wept (*tears unnumbered will ye shed*).

"That I will do." *He has much love here, even from those among his kin who he once opposed.* He thought of the flame, glowing in mortal skin. *Especially those.*

A glimpse at Dagnýr looking at a picture of his brother back in Iceland, worried for him. *I am my brother's keeper,* Dagnýr broadcasted.

Tenn' enomentielva. Galadriel held out her hand.

The mists fell over the glass again. Olórin wrapped it up and tucked it away. Then he went outside to sit on his porch, smoke a pipe, and gaze up at the stars.

You are indeed not alone, Dagnýr.

This Is The Way The World Ends

Chapter Summary

Dagnýr Sigurðsson feels the end of one universe, and is caught in the storm at the beginning of a new era.

Chapter Notes

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

October 2020

Toronto, Ontario, Canada

"Class dismissed! Have a great rest of the day!"

Dagnýr Sigurðsson smiled at his students as they left the classroom, a smile of encouragement, pride - *you can do it. You are the future.*

When it was just one left, slow to pack up her things and head out, Dagnýr's eyes trailed to his favorite work by his fraternal twin brother Sören, of which he'd bought the original to hang in his classroom. It was one of Sören's earliest works, all the way back to 2006, a catharsis in the weeks of fury following the necessary death of their uncle Einar, who Sören had Force choked to death before Einar could rape Margrét to death. Called *Eschaton*, it was the clash of mythology and science, the universe being torn asunder, galaxies spiraling, wild with dying stars, a sparkling, pure white firebird flying from a supernova, breathing fire upon a god-like shadowy figure who wore a crown, horns and wielded a great hammer, creating a flaming rip in the fabric of space.

He looked at it, as he did each day when class was over. The reminder that humanity had the potential to destroy itself, to snuff out all of its rich history, stories, beauty, gone forever - and some would blame this on the march of progress, of technological advancement and new scientific discoveries. But for Dagnýr, science was hope - even now that he'd met ancient beings that science would say did not exist, he himself bore powers that science would think not possible. Every step forward humanity took, in Dagnýr's eyes, was a step closer to enlightenment, a step closer to humans finally understanding they needed to come together across race, creed, a step further away from the extinction event that loomed over all.

His uncle Einar had mocked him, before he'd escaped to Oxford, and sometimes the voice still rang out two decades later: *I work every day for a living putting food in your worthless mouth. You are good for nothing. All you do is hide behind your books, but what use is it in the real world? Who gives a shit about any of it?*

Dagnýr finally answered back with his own words, arguing with a ghost long gone. *They will be giving a shit twenty years from now. Hopefully two hundred. Two thousand.* He squared his shoulders. *My name will live on in history, with the work I have done. No one - except maybe my siblings - will remember you. Þú varst alltaf sá sem var sannarlega einskis virði, frændi.*

He had lived longer outside of Iceland than he'd lived in it - his accent was wholly Canadian now, and he thought more in English, but when his thoughts reverted to Icelandic...

Sören.

He could feel the hair on his arms and the back of his neck stand on end.

His eyes went back to the firebird. He was right there now, in that universe, the painting made real.

Then perish, the Flame Imperishable spoke to the Dark Lord.

The firebird's eyes glowed, diamond-brilliant.

Dagnýr dropped to his knees with a choking gasp, as if the breath was sucked out of him, caught in a wave of fire.

In his mind's eye, he saw a volcano, erupting.

"Professor Sigurðsson?" called his student, in the distance, but she might have well been miles away. He was holding the edge of his desk, trembling, the room spinning. "Are you all right?"

He couldn't answer. He couldn't make words. There were no words. There was *nothing*. He couldn't breathe. There was only fire. Everything was too hot, too bright. The ground shook, though nobody else could feel it... the walls shimmered and vibrated, though nobody else could see it.

So bright. World swallowed in white fire...

"Somebody help the professor to the infirmary! Or call paramedics!"

—

Dagnýr opened his eyes. His husband Matt was at his side, face pinched with worry, stroking his hair, his face.

He looked over at the doctor, who was smiling. "OK," she said. "Hi. Glad you're with us again."

"What happened?"

"You fainted. We ran some tests on you - thankfully, it wasn't a heart attack or a stroke. So we think it may have been a panic attack, considering the news of what happened in your home country."

It wasn't a fucking panic attack. Dagnýr's eyes met Matt's again - they had the same exact thought at the same exact time.

"I would advise you to take the rest of this week off, get some rest, and then next week, get an appointment with a professional -"

Dagnýr waved his hand dismissively. "I already go to therapy once a week and I'm on an antidepressant."

"Your meds may need adjusting, with a panic attack this severe."

"Fine." He wasn't about to argue with her, he just wanted to go home.

He rode in the passenger's seat, Matt driving home. "Where are the twins?" he asked.

"With Jamie." Jamie was a neighbor of theirs, teenage girl, nice kid.

"Jesus Christ." Dagnýr rubbed his face like a wet cat, disgruntled to be given a bath. "I wonder if they've been screaming up a storm."

"Probably." Matt's jaw set. "So... *that*." He looked over at Dagnýr, and then back at the highway. "Real talk now, I felt it too. And... the Eyjafjallajökull volcano erupted." He mangled the pronunciation, as all non-Icelanders did. "It was on the news."

Dagnýr folded his arms, leaned back in his seat, and closed his eyes. "I didn't see the news, I was in class, I had no way of knowing, but I still... saw. I didn't know how to tell the doctor in there, *oh yeah, I just felt everyone in my family die in another universe!*. And judging from the eruption, *Sören felt it too*."

"That's... what it was?"

Their eyes met, and held. "Edmund - Gandalf - whatever the fuck his name is, warned us this was coming, over a year ago. It... it came." Dagnýr pinched the bridge of his nose. *My brother, the shitposting memelord, literally destroyed Melkor with a meme. "Then perish." That is the most Sören thing Sören has ever done.* "So now..."

"Yeah, now what, exactly?" Matt raised an eyebrow.

"What comes after any explosion like that. The fallout." Dagnýr shivered.

—

November 2020

These had been strange weeks. After a few days off last month, Dagnýr had returned to work as usual. The campus was abuzz with students talking about the weird weather, an increase in "spoop" and "creepypasta". The calm, rational atmosphere of Dagnýr's classroom was an oasis, even as Dagnýr knew the truth of what was happening. He remembered Edmund's words in Reykjavik, after Margrét's wedding, after they had seen in the *palantir* what they needed to put the last pieces of this puzzle together.

As above, so below. What happens in the first universe that was, affects all the others, somehow, as a rock thrown into a pond makes ripples. The end there, is the new beginning, here. Magic comes back into the world, for better or for worse.

...It will get worse before it gets better.

Matt was feeding the twins when he got home. Dagnýr smiled - at least there was this. A star of hope. Harmony in the chaos.

"We're low on diapers," Matt said, looking up. "I meant to tell you yesterday but I forgot after the fiasco of our daughter deciding to pee on me -"

Dagnýr chuckled. This was *such* welcome normalcy. "It's fine. Let's make a run to the store, grab diapers, some other odds and ends, yeah?"

It was a perfectly boring, mundane shopping trip, with Carrie and Maedelle riding in the twin stroller, sucking their pacifiers - every now and again Dagnýr looked at his daughters, the dark-haired Carrie, the red-haired Maedelle, and his eyes teared up a little, tiny and beautiful, *his blood*. Moments like this, he understood what Maglor was on about, with the Song. He could hear it sometimes, when he looked at his girls.

He closed his eyes - he could feel Galadriel looking in at them, across the chasm between worlds, over in Valinor.

Her voice spoke into his mind, deep and clear as a bell. *Hanno. Merin sinomë nelyë.*

Dagnýr smiled. *I miss you too.* His hand rose slightly in greeting, though to anyone else looking at him in the store, nobody would know who he was waving at.

They are lovely, Finrod. A pause. I suppose this means I will not see you for some time.

Probably not. His eyes opened and met Matt's, who was giving him a curious look.

I understand. Be well.

The connection dropped then, as if she "hung up the phone", and it was Matt who spoke into his mind now, across their Force bond.

Was that Galadriel again?

Yeah. Dagnýr ran a nervous hand through his hair. *That will never stop being weird.*

No shit? Hi, this is my husband, Finrod Fucking Felagund...

Dagnýr snorted. *And welcome to our reality TV show, Keeping Up With the Fëanorions...*

They checked out, and on their way to Matt's Volvo, a gaunt, florid-faced middle-aged woman, homeless from the looks of her - tattered clothing, long grey hair greasy and matted - staggered towards them.

Dagnýr sighed - even here in Canada, light years ahead of the US on social issues, there was homelessness, poverty. It *hurt* to see. He reached in his pocket and pulled out his wallet, readying a bank note that would be enough to buy the woman a meal, not enough to buy drugs.

But then their eyes met, and there was a wild look in her blue eyes that alarmed him. The stroller stopped rolling.

"You," the woman called out, pointing a finger at Dagnýr, her hand shaking. *"I know what you are."*

Dagnýr took a deep breath. He'd heard all of the "creepypasta" about increased paranormal activity, religious and spiritual people of any kind feeling that something had

gone awry, and of course many people with the kind of mental illness that would contribute to homelessness had sensitivities as well. But this was the first time since the Dagor Dagorath that anyone had *seen* him.

This was the first time, period, that anyone had seen him. Indeed, one of Dagnýr's reasons for becoming a scientist years ago was it was the last place anyone would look for someone like him.

Dagnýr held out the bank note. "Take this and go in peace."

"*You don't belong here.*" And then her mad gaze turned towards the baby girls, who were getting agitated in their stroller, whimpering. "*They don't belong here.*"

In a flash, she had a knife in her hand, and lunged for the stroller.

Before he knew what he was doing, Dagnýr waved his hand and the woman was flung back three meters, landing on her backside in the hard pavement.

He never used the Force in public before today - he had spent his entire life keeping his abilities masked, necessarily. He would *not* have used it in public like this, with the risk of exposure, if it was not necessary. She was mad, and to be pitied, but she would attack his children, and he was not having that, meeting fire with fire.

Her madness and the hardening of a life on the streets gave her an immunity to pain. She got up, and now there was a knife in the other hand as she *threw* the first one -

He caught it with superhuman reflexes, and Dagnýr raised his other fist, clenching it. The woman *flew* two meters upward in the air, arms and legs flailing, choking, suspended in air, looking at him with terror as she struggled for breath, struggled against the lock he had on her.

"I told you," he said through grit teeth, "to leave in peace. You would attempt to harm children. *My* children. With your sad, ruined life it would be a mercy to kill you. I will not deal in mercy today."

He let go, and she dropped to the ground again, crying out as she hit the pavement hard - still alive, but now injured, likely broken bones. "Go go GO," Dagnýr yelled at Matt, who ran, pushing the stroller. Dagnýr used the Force to shove the carriage of groceries down the parking lot to his car, and ran behind. He popped the trunk and used the Force to load the items from the carriage to the trunk - at this point, time was of the essence to get the *fuck* out of there, it was too late to pretend to be normal.

As they pulled out of the parking lot, Dagnýr looked around nervously. "It wasn't busy," he said, "so I don't think we were seen."

"Hopefully." Matt nodded.

"Hopefully." Dagnýr cringed as he heard his babies crying, shaken up from the disturbance. "Close call. Too close for comfort."

How many more times would this happen? Would this be an angry mob next time, instead of a lone attacker?

The first forty-eight hours after the attack, and Dagnýr's response in public, he braced himself, wondering if he'd be caught. But there was nothing, and the days continued to go on as normal - whatever normal even was anymore - and he relaxed.

It got to be the twenty-fifth of November, Dagnýr's thirty-sixth birthday, and what would also be Sören's... not that it mattered, now. Dagnýr and Matt were going out to dinner and a movie, just the two of them, the first real date they'd had since the twins arrived. Normally Dagnýr would have hired Jamie to babysit, happy to give her extra money, but after the incident at the grocery store he didn't want to potentially put a teenage girl in harm's way, if anyone else sensing what the girls were came sniffing by.

So he hired the one local he knew *could* deal with it.

"Say hi to uncle Olórin."

Carrie spit up formula onto "Edmund Billingsley"'s sweater. Edmund raised an eyebrow at Dagnýr.

"OK, so," Dagnýr said, trying to disguise his amusement and failing, "pretty straightforward. There's diapers, an instruction manual for how to change them, and they'll need to be fed around eight o'clock, then burped. If they can't get to sleep, they like being sung to, if you don't want to sing, they like Miley Cyrus for some reason." He could feel Maglor cringing all the way in Iceland.

"Noted," Edmund said dryly.

"We'll try to get back at a decent hour - no later than eleven. But we might be a bit late depending on traffic." Dagnýr reached into his pocket for a small notebook, and tore out a sheet of paper he'd prepared, handing it to Edmund. "That's emergency contacts in case Force forbid you need them. My cell is at the top of that list, in case we're stuck in traffic and running behind and you need to call and ask what the fuck is going on, Matt's cell is right underneath should I be unreachable like my phone died or something. Sören's, Maglor's, and Dooku's cells are all in the third section on that list, and Matt's parents are in the fourth section should *they* be unreachable."

"Also noted. But hopefully it won't come to that."

"Nah, I mean... it's just a few hours. We're not even going that far, I'm just doing a little something for my birthday."

"Yes. Happy birthday, Dagnýr." Edmund put a hand on his shoulder. "I do have a gift for you, but I won't delay you any further, I can give it to you when you come back."

"Aw, you didn't have to -"

"You're a dear friend." Edmund hugged him. Then he patted Dagnýr's back. "Go. Enjoy yourself."

"Thank you so much for being willing to babysit for me, I really appreciate it!" Dagnýr stopped to kiss his daughters' faces, stroke their hair, boop their little noses, getting choked up at the marvel of these tiny, perfect beings he created. Then he waved on his way out of the elderly professor's house.

Once he was in the car, he pulled out his cell - it was already late evening in Akureyri, Iceland four hours ahead of Toronto, but he had to call his twin today. He dialed Sören's

cell, electing to keep the discussion in English for the courtesy of Matt on his end, and Maglor and Dooku on Sören's.

After three rings, Sören answered. "Hej."

"Hi! Happy birthday!"

Sören chuckled. "Jæja, happy birthday! I knew you'd be calling sometime today -"

"Yeah, I wanted to call sooner than this, but you know, school, kids..." Dagnýr laughed. "Never a dull moment."

"I bet. You have plans though, right? All work and no play, and all of that."

"Yeah, Matt and I are on the highway now. We're going out to eat, and then we're gonna see the new Marvel movie. Did you do anything fun for your birthday, even though, well, you know." He wasn't going to say *even though you're not getting any older anymore* on the phone.

"We went to the Botanical Garden, and also went to dinner, Nico made a cake, and just before you called the three of us were gonna, um."

Dagnýr facepalmed. "Play a game of Uno?"

"Mmmmmm, something like that."

"Dammit, Sören, TMI."

Snúdur meowed into the phone, and then Huan barked in the distance. "The fur children say hello," Sören said. "How are my goddaughters?"

"Beautiful, wonderful, and perfect. They never cease to amaze me, I made these."

"I hope you got a sitter for the night so you get at least a few hours peace and quiet...?"

"Yeah, I did." Dagnýr snickered, thinking of Carrie spitting up on Edmund. *The House of Finwë troll genes breed true.* "I get anxiety being away from them, but..."

"You need a break every so often and it doesn't make you a bad parent, it makes you human." Sören caught himself then, with a little snort.

"Mhm. Well... I don't want to keep you from your *ahem, perfectly chaste and pure, wholesome game of Uno.* I just wanted to let you know I'm thinking of you on our birthday."

"*Takk, litli bróðir.*"

"You're only seven minutes older, you know."

"You're still my little brother. A little brother who casts a big shadow." Sören's voice was husky with emotion. "I'm very proud of you."

"Jesus, Sören, don't punch me in the feels right now." Dagnýr swallowed hard. "I'm proud of you too." Across their Force bond, across an ocean, Dagnýr hugged Sören with his mind. It was hard to believe sometimes that they had once bitterly opposed each other,

thousands of years ago, when they were Finrod and his uncle Fëanor. "Enjoy the rest of your evening."

"You too." A pause. "I love you."

The lapse into Icelandic was deliberate, the language of their hearts, their blood. "*Ég elska þig líka.*"

Matt had made reservations at the Thai place Dagnýr liked, and on their way out they walked past two men in black suits and sunglasses - a bit overdressed for the restaurant, but if they were on a date, Dagnýr knew some gay guys were more vain than others, so it wasn't particularly out of the ordinary.

But then the hair on his arms and the back of his neck stood on end, just before the men paused. "Good evening," said one of them. "Doctor Dagnýr Sigurðsson?"

Dagnýr ran. He got as far as three meters before he was hit with a dart in his back. He heard Matt struggling just before everything went dark.

—

It was two in the morning. Olórin looked at the clock with weary eyes. Dagnýr and Matt had not been reachable for hours.

He was going to have to call out of work, much as he hated doing that.

That being said, if what happened was what he *suspected* had happened - and there had been interference from the magic of sensitives, somehow, so he couldn't have warned them, wouldn't have known, not until after the fact, when came *the disturbance in the Force*, as Fingolfin-Dooku had called it... he wasn't going to be able to stay much longer in Toronto, anyway. It was rather a pity.

Indeed, if his suspicions were correct, he would need to be out of this house, itself, as soon as possible. That was going to be interesting, with the girls and his dog and two cats in the car.

The girls were agitated, whimpering. He changed them, and then rocked them in his arms, singing a spell to help them get back to sleep, what rest they could get for now. *None of this Miley Cyrus nonsense. Elves these days.*

2:24 now. He put them down, and reached for the slip of paper Dagnýr had given him. Iceland was four hours ahead, and Sören Sigurðsson was not a morning person.

He took out one of the flip phones he had in case of an emergency, that would be disposed of immediately after the call was made.

One ring. Two. Three. Four.

A *growl*. "Whoever the *fuck* you are, I'm not interested in what you're selling, especially not at six fucking o'clock in the morning -"

"Fëanor." The emergency codephrase. "*Venenya vilyanirwanen ná quanta as angolingwi.*"

Dead silence. Then, simply: "Go on."

"Ask Macalaurë about the three of you going on a vacation, and the best options for travel and accommodations, I would truly *love* to see you again, and I know of two young ladies who would as well. Call me in four hours for further instructions, here is a number you can reach me." He gave Sören the number of another burner phone. "It would be best if you called me from a new phone, *the reception on yours is rather problematic.*" Before Sören could say anything in response, he concluded, simply, "Good day."

Chapter End Notes

Veneya vilyanirwanen ná quanta as angolingwi - My hovercraft is full of eels.
(Quenya)

Strange Highways

Chapter Summary

In Australia in late 2020, Ali Jonsson is reluctant to go on her latest driving assignment, until people piss her off.

TW racist microaggressions.

Chapter Notes

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

December 2020

Adelaide, Australia

"Mmmmf." Ali squinted against the light streaming in, dappled across her sable skin. Mornings were earlier now. She was not a morning person. She didn't care much for hot weather, either, and it was already 22 C and early.

Her boyfriend, Kenny, very much was a morning person and a lover of Australian summers. He smiled at her and kissed the tip of her nose. "Hey, gorgeous."

"Mrrrrff." She kissed his nose back.

Kenny laughed. "I love you too."

"Yeh." Ali made a noise into the pillow. "Seriously, *fuck* summer." She did her best impression of Gollum. "Summerses, we hates them, precious..."

Kenny snorted. "I don't know what it says about us that I've still got wood for you when you're doing Gollum."

"I don't know, mate." She rolled over to give him a kiss. "You've also got morning breath."

"Yeah?"

"Yeh." She kissed him again. "Mmmmmm." Her hand reached down to palm the bulge in his boxers. "You want some pussy breath?"

Kenny laughed, and pulled a breast out of her camisole, sucking the nipple hungrily.

Then her phone went off. "Jesus *Fucking* Christ."

Ali waved her hand and the phone flew from the headboard shelf into her hand. She recognized the number - it was her boss, Murdock. She had to take it. "What." She rubbed her dreadlocks.

"Good morning, sunshine."

"Yeh. What."

"I got a gig for ya." Alinta Jonsson was a roadtrain driver for Borovkov Enterprises; she'd been with the company for eight years.

"Mkay. How soon do I need to drive out? Today's my kids' birthday." She had a twin son and daughter who were turning six today.

"Tomorrow."

That was still too soon for her liking, but that was part of her contract - 24 hours notice. Sometimes she got more, usually she got more. Not this time. "Where am I going?"

"Uluru."

"You've *got* to be shitting me. Fucking *Uluru*? What am I picking up?"

"It's not what, but who. Three cunts. It's Protocol Delta."

That was code for No Questions Asked, No Record Given. She had exactly four of those assignments in eight years. She was not allowed to discuss the particulars of the job with anyone, not even her own partner, only her boss, and there was a certain way to go about handling the information, with code phrases and the like.

At least Uluru was only a seventeen-hour drive one-way from Adelaide, at optimum traffic - she'd had longer assignments - but it was still going to take her away for a bit. "Where am I driving them to?"

"Sydney."

That was a significantly longer drive than Uluru back to Adelaide. "Fuck." She would be *very* well-paid for this, but...

"You got a pen and paper handy, luv?"

"Yeh, let me..." Ali waved her hand and the bedtable drawer opened; a pen and pad flew out as she sat up, rubbing her face. "OK, ready to write it down."

Kenny was in the bathroom, presumably relieving himself. When he came out he waved his hand and a clean Princess Peach T-shirt that had been folded on top of the dresser flew over his arm, which he pulled on. Ali got off the phone and gave Kenny an apologetic look, but he already knew.

"You have a job."

Ali nodded.

Ali was the primary breadwinner, driving on-call for Borovkov Enterprises. Most of her jobs were short, a few hours of driving things from one place to the other. Once in a great while she had longer assignments and those typically paid very well. Kenny Kim, a Korean-American in his late thirties who had moved to Australia twelve years ago, was a freelance photographer, making less money, and for the last six years he'd been primary caregiver of their children, Metallica and Megadeth Kim-Jonsson.

Once they were dressed, they went to the twins' room and started singing "Happy Birthday". Which turned into Kenny and Ali trying to sing it in the death metal style for a

second round, growling and headbanging - Kenny played air guitar - while the kids also headbanged, whipping around their matching mullets, and threw the horns.

"I don't want a happy birthday," Megadeth said, folding his arms. "I want a..." He roared, "BRUTAL BIRTHDAYYYYYYY."

—

Unfortunately, a brutal birthday - whatever that even meant - was not what their classmates' mums would approve of. The party started at noon - they'd bought a cake instead of baking one, though Ali made plates of fairy bread for the kids, and Kenny heated up appetizers he'd been making last night for the kids and adults. The party was held in the backyard, with a neon wallaby piñata hanging from the clothesline.

As the kids munched on fairy bread, Ali stole a slice, a comfort snack associated with happy memories from childhood, though she tended to only eat it now as an adult under stress. One of the mums, a late-thirties woman with a bleach blonde bob named Karen, looked very uncomfortable, like she wanted to be anywhere but there, and Ali wondered if it was just the loudness of the kids or if it was something else.

Finally "something else" came to the woodwork. "Um, I don't mean to be rude, but..."

Here it fucking goes. Over twenty-seven years, Ali had learned pretty much every time someone started a sentence with "I don't mean to be rude, but", they were absolutely going to follow it up with being rude. Ali shoved the rest of the fairy bread slice in her mouth and folded her arms, waiting for it.

"What are they?"

"What do you mean, what are they." Ali raised an eyebrow.

"Well, I mean..."

"They're human." Though her father claimed he had "elf blood" on occasion, usually when he'd had a few.

"I was just curious because -"

"Because they don't look white? They're a quarter white. I've got an Icelandic father and Aboriginal mother, and their father over there is Korean." *Not that that's really any of your business.*

"I... see." Karen made a face. "You don't think that's odd? Like, not going to cause problems...?"

Flashbacks to the bullying as a biracial child. Ali felt her hackles going up - Karen might be more "polite" than they were but she still knew a bully when she saw one. "You know what? Shut your fucking cunt *face*. Because *that's* going to cause fucking problems." Ali was ready to throw the plate of fairy bread at her, holding back.

"I beg your pardon..."

"No. I beg *your* pardon. You think you can come in here, eat my food, breathe my air, disrespect my children? Piss off."

"All right." Karen put her fingers in her mouth and whistled. "Becky. We're going home now."

Becky stamped her feet. "But Mummmmm -"

"I don't know why you need to make your child suffer for your own rude behavior. It's not her fault, she did nowt wrong. I can drive her home," Ali said.

"No, that's... *quite* all right." Karen started dragging Becky.

Some of the other mums were looking at Ali strangely now, and she didn't even care. She ate another piece of fairy bread, tempted to yell "RAWR" with her mouth full.

Finally one of them approached her, a young, freckled, unruly-blonde-haired hippie named Kylie. "I kind of overheard all that and I'm sorry."

"Ta, yeh, it's unfortunate." Ali nodded.

"I don't know why it matters. And I'd be so proud if I was part Aboriginal! Such a fascinating heritage. So *exotic*."

Oh no. Oh no...

Kylie smiled. "Can I touch your hair?" She started touching Ali's locks without waiting for permission.

The fuck.

—

After the party, Kenny found Ali in the bathroom, crying.

"Babe." He put his arms around her waist, his hands warm with soothing energy.

"It's 20-fucking-20, why are we still dealing with this shit?" Ali took a few deep breaths, trying to calm down.

Kenny shrugged.

"As much as I hate going away so soon after our kids' birthday, I guess going out on the road for a bit will help me clear my head." Ali sobbed a little. Though they'd had a lot of love at home, wonderful parents, all the bullying really got to two of her brothers, who were incarcerated now for petty crimes - though they would have honest work waiting for them when they got out of jail, Ali had asked her contacts at Borovkov Enterprises to help them.

Her phone rang. "Swear on me mum, that better not be Murdock again." It wasn't. "Da!"

Böðvar Jónsson's voice came over the other end of the line. "Hey, possum."

Ali choked up again. "Da. How's Mum?"

"Doing good. We're all good here." Sheep bleated in the background. "They say hi."

Ali chuckled. "You're such a goober, Da."

"How's the grandkids? They're six today, já?"

Even though her da had been living in Australia for thirty years and sounded more Aussie than Icelandic, it still slipped into his speech, and he still spoke on the in-breath. "They are. You want me to put them on the phone?"

"Ta."

The kids were overjoyed to hear from their grandpa. Ali could hear him sing "Happy Birthday" in Icelandic over the phone and it made her fuzzy and achingly nostalgic all at once. They chattered back and forth to him about their presents, the wallaby piñata, the cake and the fairy bread.

Finally Metallica and Megadeth gave the phone back to their mum. "Sorry if they talked your ear off -"

"No, it's fine, luv. They have something coming from me in the post but dunno when it'll get there." He lived in a rural part of South Australia, hours away, not somewhere to easily fly to, on a sheep farm. He still didn't have Internet; he rarely used his cell phone.

"I'm sure they'll love it whenever they do."

"Alinta. You should come see us."

Ali felt a pang of guilt. Kenny's parents made a HUGE deal about Christmas, something they were all in for when they moved to California, and that was where they went every year. They already had airline tickets booked.

"Early next year, maybe? Though even then, you know I get short notice sometimes if I have a gig..."

"I know. But it's been awhile, possum. We're not gonna live forever."

Her father was only fifty-four, which wasn't even considered old nowadays, not really, but it rubbed in the guilt anyway. "I'll see what I can do. Maybe get winter paid vacation time bumped up sooner..."

"Já, that'd be nice. Your mum is keen on seeing you. She misses you -"

"I miss all of you." Ali's voice shook. Their warmth and love was badly needed in times like this. "I really wish I had family closer. That I could see family more often. I don't want to have to move back out to the middle of Bumfuck to make that happen -"

Böðvar laughed. "What about the middle of Shithole?"

"Oh my *god*, Da." Ali snorted. "Da, I can't even with you sometimes."

"I hear Snotrag is pretty nice..."

Ali screamed, facepalming, doubling over with laughter. "Da. *Da*. Da, why are you like this."

"I had the feeling you could use some cheering up."

"A feeling, or a *feeling*?"

"You know what I mean."

Ali nodded. "Yeh. I suppose even across the kilometers, you still *know* when your kids are in distress." And she felt it now, across their bond, the surge of concern and worry from him.

"I don't know what happened, but -"

"Just. You know." Ali made noises. "People drive me batshit sometimes."

"It's why I live out here in the middle of Bumfuck with all these sheep, possum. People drive me batshit and they are very LOUD." He didn't mean their voices; he was a strong telepath and empath. "Sheep are loud too but in a different way. A way that I can manage."

"Yeh. I got a gig tomorrow, didn't wanna but now I kind of need to get away."

"You should take a detour, depending on where you're going."

"I really can't." Protocol Delta allowed for none of that except pre-approved rest stops and even then there were strict rules about them. "I'm sorry about that." As soon as it came out of her mouth... *Oh no. Oh god.*

"Hi sorry about that -"

"OK, you know, I'm hanging up now, Da."

"Hi hanging up now, Da -"

"I love you. Talk-to-you-when-I-get-back-we'll-work-out-some-visit-details-OK-bye."

"Love you, possum -"

Ali hit End.

When Kenny came back in the room he found Ali collapsed in a gigglefit.

"Why are our parents such fucking goobers?" Ali wheezed.

"God, I think if Mom and Dad met Böövar and Medika that would be the end of the world or something."

"Luv, I think we already had the end of the world, couple months ago, if the news reports are to be believed." Ali shook her head and sat up.

"OK, so like... the super-mega-final-boss-battle-for-real-this-time-end-of-the-world."

"Kenny, you're a fucking goober too."

"Yup." Kenny gave her a kiss.

—

Ali spent a long time hugging Kenny, Metallica, and Megadeth, before she got in her car and drove to the warehouse, where her rig awaited.

"Three cunts, coming right up." She put on the stereo as she started maneuvering out of the parking lot. She smiled as Ronnie James Dio's voice came blaring out the speakers.

*It's a crazy world we live in
And I'm leaving it today
For another institution
Where crazy people play
Every time I climb the mountain
And it turned into a hill
I promised me that I'd move on
And I will*

*I, I, good for nothing
Going nowhere, so they say
Hey*

*Someone, give me blessings
For they say that I have sinned
That's when I crawl inside myself
And ride into the wind*

*On strange highways
On strange highways*

She felt a frisson down her spine, that feeling she tended to get before something big was about to happen, some sort of major change. *I wonder what's out there.*

Chapter End Notes

Ali has the surname Jonsson instead of the patronymic Böðvarsdóttir because her parents decided they didn't want to cause problems with Australian schools, etc. Her father's patronymic was also anglicized from Jónsson to Jonsson as her surname.

Böðvar Jónsson is Brynhildur and Birgitta's younger brother, and is mentioned very briefly in *In Chains* as having moved to Australia. Katrín and Einar didn't want him contacting Sören et al because of his marriage to an Aboriginal Australian; Sören has no idea he even has maternal cousins as of *In Chains* and (most of *Like Flames*).

Black Swan

Chapter Summary

MI6 gains a new agent with some special talents, and an assignment turns out maybe more favorable than he thought it would be. Or not.

May 2015

London, England

I'm being followed.

It was the end of his first week on shore leave, and Anthony Hewlett-Johnson was for once in his life grateful to be doing "normal people things" like grocery shopping, getting his vehicle washed. But he'd started to have an uneasy feeling about an hour ago, and he'd learned well by now to never, ever ignore that feeling. He'd almost died the last time he'd ignored that feeling.

Seeing the same car behind him - same color, same model, same plates - after his first errand stop was a coincidence. Seeing it a third time, a big coincidence. Seeing it a fourth time, now with two very bland cars tailing close by...

Shit.

It was time for defensive driving. He pulled ahead of two other cars, and kept his eye on the ones that he suspected of tailing him. Sure enough, they were speeding up too.

Shit shit shit shit shit fuck fuck FUCK.

He went faster. He zipped off the first exit. He thought of what to do and then he decided thinking was his exact problem here. He pulled over. He had perishables in his car that wouldn't survive a few hours for a tow, but that was less important than his life. As he stepped out of the car, he threw his cell phone in the patch of grass on the curb.

He was on foot now, walking into an alley. Not quite running, not yet. He mentally planned his route, crossing over to the next street through the alley. He came out and began to head for the coffee shop a block away. He'd pretend that his cell phone died and he needed to make some emergency phone calls. The emergency part wasn't a lie, anyway.

Just before he could do that, a car pulled out and over, and Anthony watched as two men in suits stepped out, a bald, massive black man and a shorter, wiry Asian, and then there was a blonde woman in a charcoal grey pantsuit and black aviator glasses. "Captain Hewlett-Johnson," she said crisply. "Please come with us."

Anthony wanted to bolt. The woman cocked her head to one side and said, "Pretend you have a choice."

After close to an hour of sitting in a room that looked like a cell except it had a window and he got to sit at a table drinking tea, the blonde woman came back in with a briefcase and sat on the other side of the table.

"Why am I here?" Anthony asked. "Who are you?"

"My name is Letitia Fetherstonhaugh and I work for MI6. And I think you rather know, Captain Hewlett-Johnson."

Anthony had a feeling he did in fact know, but he decided not to admit to anything one way or the other. "Why don't you explain to me, Ms. Fetherstonhaugh."

Letitia Fetherstonhaugh opened the briefcase and a laptop came out. "You were recently in Iran."

"Where I was recently is classified." He didn't care that she was MI6 and technically part of the British intelligence apparatus, he was under orders not to discuss these things.

"You were recently in Iran," Letitia emphasized, opening the laptop.

Anthony was part of the Special Boat Service, commander of a submarine. He'd been on a special, classified mission to intercept a smuggling trade of oil and weapons to Syria. It had been one of the spicier missions he'd been on.

"You see," Letitia said, typing and clicking away, "we created a bit of an incident, here. The Iranians know we sabotaged that tanker, *because they have video footage.*"

Anthony tried to keep the iron mask of control, not show any reaction. But he could feel himself starting to sweat. *Oh shit.*

Letitia turned over the laptop. A video was now playing. The footage was grainy, but it showed Anthony leading a squad forward. The tanker had been booby-trapped, as if sabotage and intervention had been anticipated.

Anthony had learned at a tender age that he was a special boy, possessed of certain abilities that other children didn't have. He'd also learned that showing them off to try to impress his peers met with fear and hostility rather than respect, so he'd kept them carefully guarded, only using his abilities in the privacy of his own home, alone - and even then, being careful - or in times of absolute, dire need. Unfortunately, in a do-or-die situation there was no room to do anything but react, so despite the risk of demonstrating what he could do in front of his squad, he did it anyway to save their lives and his own. The video footage showed him using telekinesis to shove his men out of the way and redirect incoming projectiles. There was no fucking way he could plausibly deny what was happening, watching it now.

When the video was done, Letitia pursed her lips and folded her arms.

Anthony sat back in his chair.

"So, what," he blurted out. "Is now the time when you take me away and perform experiments on me, or something? After serving my country all these years, as soon as I was out of school, after all the sacrifices I've made, all the times I've put my life in danger -"

"Now is the time," Letitia said, "where I offer you a job."

Anthony blinked slowly. "A... job."

"Yes. You see, Captain Hewlett-Johnson - may I call you Anthony, since we might probably be colleagues?"

Anthony shrugged.

"You see, Anthony... I work for a section of MI6 that technically, on the books, does not exist. But we do exist, and the purpose of our existence is to protect people like you... and protect the population *from* people like you. Having someone with your set of gifts get captured by an enemy state and put to work for them... well, that could be very bad. And the general populace can't handle the truth that a small segment of humanity can do what you do, and there are some... weird, paranormal things in our world even beyond that. It would create mass civil unrest, the like of which we have never seen before and are not prepared to handle."

"When you say *paranormal* what do you mean? Ghosts and witches and... *werewolves* and all of that rubbish?" Anthony bristled, suddenly very uncomfortable. *If Twilight is real I want off this fucking planet.*

"No. My section of MI6 has a very... special relationship... with a very special person, who's a bit of an informant, has kept tabs on other special people, who don't know that they're being monitored, because we let them be for now. He has a few aliases, the one you'd know is Ingmar Borovkov."

"...The multi-billionaire, CEO, Ingmar Borovkov. Notorious recluse, no pictures of himself, nobody really has ever seen him or knows anything about him. He's like me?"

"He's like himself. He's not human."

He's a pain in the bloody arse, Letitia broadcasted. Anthony tried not to eavesdrop on other people's thoughts but this one was loud and clear.

Anthony let that sink in, feeling like he was hit by an anvil. "I need a fucking drink."

Letitia got up and hit a buzzer. The bald black man in the suit who'd accompanied her earlier opened the door and peeked in. "Jules," Letitia said, "can you tell Tom we need some, ah, refreshments in here? Thanks." Jules nodded and closed the door again.

"So..." Anthony took a deep breath. "What happens if I say no to your offer?"

"I would rather you think in terms of saying yes. I really don't want to threaten you."

"Well, I'm thinking in practical terms here. I already can't tell anyone outside of my family I'm with the SBS." Anthony felt a tightness in his chest, thinking of his father, who was starting to go. He already wasn't around enough. "If I'm working for something that technically doesn't exist am I just going to... disappear?"

"No."

Then a gangly, pimply, awkward-looking ginger man barely in his early twenties came in with a tray of various alcoholic beverages and snacks. He set it down and left, looking

terrified all the way, like he somehow knew what Anthony was.

"Pick your poison," Letitia said, and reached for a bottle of Auchentoshan.

Anthony crooked his finger and a shot glass slid across the table to him. There was no use hiding it now. When Letitia was done filling her shot glass, the Auchentoshan hovered over the table and tipped over to pour his glass.

"As technically my department of MI6 doesn't exist, on record I work for another department of MI6... and I am also listed as an employee of Borovkov Enterprises. So depending on who I have to disclose information to... most of the time they hear I work for Borovkov Enterprises. It would be the same for you."

Anthony considered. "What would you even have me doing, anyway?"

"A lot of things. A... lot." Letitia glanced at the bottle of Auchentoshan again as she drained her glass, and this time Anthony was the one to pour her a shot, the bottle lifting off the table and tipping. "You'll be making very good money now, even moreso than your current salary... and you will earn every single pound." She looked at Anthony and swirled the whisky around in her glass, inhaling deeply before she raised it. "I've familiarized myself with your service record, and I'm impressed. I need a second-in-command, and specifically, someone who can be trained to do my job in case something happens to me, since there is a non-zero risk with the line of work we do."

"And that's just... it. You want me to say yes and go to work for this super-secret branch of MI6 handling cases of people like me, and train to be another you if shit hits the fan."

"Your country wants you to. And I believe your uncle would have wanted that as well."

His uncle Nigel, who had the same gifts - who had died a war hero in the Gulf, sacrificing himself to save his unit. Anthony knocked back his glass, remembering the man who had been more of a father than his own father when he was a child. Nigel was the reason why he'd joined the Royal Navy fresh out of school, in loving memory.

"Well then," Anthony said. "For Queen and for family."

—

December 2020
Sydney, Australia

Anthony made a noise when his alarm woke him up. He'd been up late with his latest conquest, and after Anthony had kicked him out he'd tried to get to sleep but couldn't, laying there in his latest round of existential angst. *I'm too old for this.* At forty, turning forty-one in February, it wasn't that he was too old for sex - his body certainly didn't think so, his libido showing no signs of slowing down with age - but he was tired of the one-night stands, or the fuckbuddy hookups in different parts of the world. He wanted someone to hold at night, someone to wake up to. He wanted to settle down, find a boyfriend, a husband. Of course, he'd been married to his job all this time, and his line of work - first in the SBS, now in MI6 - wasn't exactly friendly to a healthy, honest relationship, or really a relationship in general with the risk it carried, not to mention having to up and travel for work at a moment's notice.

He'd been sent to Australia rather abruptly to help oversee the safe transfer of three paranormals into Sydney. The case file described them as a polyamorous triad, who had recently acquired the twin daughters of a missing person of interest. Such work might not seem like it was all that dangerous or time-consuming, but he had to see to every last detail - setting them up with proper housing, sparing no expense, making sure they had new identification and a paper trail to back it up so they could live a relatively normal life in Australia with employment, schooling and whatever else they wanted to do. And the move had to be carefully guarded - not even the people physically transporting them could be given details on exactly what they were doing. He was stressed out more than usual, pulling out long hours, thus the need to unleash last night. He would be very glad when this assignment was done.

He'd gotten a nap in the wee hours, and it hadn't been enough. He felt like hell, not in the mood to finally meet the people he'd been working so diligently on behalf of the last while. But he had to do it anyway.

He went through his usual morning routine, after morning tea he went for a run even though he was dead tired - the SBS had a very intense fitness regimen that he still continued. He jogged through the park near the flat he was temporarily renting, listening to Jamiroquai on his earbuds, using his other senses to be mindful of his surroundings, who and what was around him.

*Say do you love me
If you do tell me something
And make it true
Do you love me
I need to know
Baby can't you tell me where we're gonna go
Where do we go from here
I've been trying to find out but I'm still some way from knowing*

*It's not exactly clear no no
The love you should be giving me
Is the love you're rarely showing
That's the, that's the way love goes
And where it's taking us well we don't know
So lets move straight on ahead
And tow in the line between us girl*

*I think I'd sooner make this love dead
Than waste all my time on you, yeah
I'm wasting all my time
I'm gonna learn learn learn
That's the way love goes*

It was a song he'd heard at least a hundred times before but now he had a strange sense of foreboding. He chalked it up to residual angst from last night, though he knew of course "just feelings" were rarely "just feelings" in his case.

He spent extra time getting ready, wanting to make a good impression even though this was more of an over-and-done deal. He brushed his teeth, shaved clean with a straight razor, put a little gel in his carefully styled black hair - frowning at the touch of grey that was starting to noticeably creep in - and added contacts to his naturally green eyes instead of putting on the wire-rimmed glasses that he sometimes wore. A splash of cologne. Black tie, white shirt rolled up at the sleeves in the summer heat, black vest,

black trousers.

The Borovkov Enterprises processing center where he had the appointment this morning was near Lily Park. He arrived early so he could spend a few minutes watching the black swans, something that usually relaxed him. He'd loved swans since he was a small child. That was one of the good things about this assignment in Australia - swan-watching. Except today. He'd dreamed of swans last night, he'd had another one of those dreams where he had long weird-blonde hair and was poncing about in white robes, way too eager to visit his brother, the blacksmith. Except he didn't have a brother in real life, being an only child. It felt like wishful thinking, always wanting brothers of his own, but it also felt like more, as unnerving as it was comforting, a home away from home in his dreams. He hadn't had one of those dreams in a long time - he wondered why it came back again so suddenly.

He sat in the office and waited, multitasking on his laptop. He *felt* the first one before he walked in, like the temperature in the room suddenly shot up by ten degrees. Then he looked and his jaw dropped.

He was looking at one of the most delicious men he'd ever seen - six feet tall, pale, slim, broad shouldered. Shoulder-length dark curls showing just the first few threads of silver. A sultry, smouldering look to him, with heavy-lidded, long-lashed brown eyes, a face that was more pretty than handsome, a fine growth of facial hair framing full, pouty lips that looked like they were made for kissing *or sucking cock*. He was wearing faded jeans, Doc Martens boots and a Joy Division shirt, short sleeves revealing flames tattooed on one arm, ocean waves tattooed on the other. He looked like a rock star, moved with fluid sensuality that suggested he'd be a good dancer or good at other things.

Two other men walked in - one close to seven feet, long waves of dark hair to the middle of his back, silver eyes like pieces of a mirror, pale, classic features like a living statue, wearing a Metallica T-shirt and jeans, pushing a blue pram. The other was a well-preserved senior, six-five, olive-skinned, silver-haired and bearded, high cheekbones, patrician nose, intense dark eyes with bushy, angry-looking eyebrows, a sort of elegance to him even dressed down in black trousers and a blue blazer. This was the poly triad of paranormals - Anthony would have paid good money to watch the three of them in bed.

But more than the other two, it was the one with the curls who drew him. And more than anything else, his brown eyes. Soulful. Sweet, a bit sad.

Anthony's mouth went dry, a frisson down his spine.

The one with the curls and the pretty eyes gave him an annoyed look, like he resented having to be here at all - not that Anthony could blame him, they'd been through a bit of a shakeup. *Let's get on with it*, the man broadcasted. "Jæja?" was what he said aloud.

That was the Icelander. Anthony found his words. "Ah. Yes." He rose from his desk, walked over, and put out his hand. "Sören Sigurðsson... welcome to Australia."

Anthony gave the speech he'd rehearsed, letting them know they were expected to stay in Australia for awhile - small vacations were fine, if they let someone know where they were going. He presented them with their new identity paperwork, the package including access to new bank accounts and credit cards. After the speech, it was his job to take them to the new place. He let them have some time to let it all sink in as he fetched the company van.

Sören rode shotgun, the other two gentlemen in the back. Sören bottle-fed one of the

babies. Anthony felt very awkward around children, and yet somehow watching Sören feeding and rocking a baby did not detract from his appeal but made it maddeningly stronger for some reason. Anthony tried to keep his eyes on the road and not steal glances at Sören, but that was getting more and more difficult.

At last they arrived, at the mansion he'd procured for them to be very, very comfortable. Lots of space... not just on their property, but not being right on top of neighbors, which was less likelihood for their gifts to be detected. He was proud of his handiwork, and yet Sören had another annoyed look on his face as they pulled in.

"This is a bit extravagant on the government's dime, já?" Sören's eyebrow went up. "This is, like, ten times the size of what we had in Akureyri." Sören snorted. "I don't know who was the posh twat who picked this out, but..."

"I am the posh twat" Anthony felt a prickle of irritation.

Hi The Posh Twat, I'm Sören, the brat broadcasted. "Oh. Well. Sorry." But the way Sören's lips quirked suggested he wasn't really that sorry.

Anthony wanted to forget about it later, but he kept thinking about Sören. The audacity. That sexy accent. Those eyes. Even in the recent grief he'd endured with his brother suddenly going missing, according to his case file, there was still so much life in him. The world seemed to be more colorful and vibrant, pulsing around Sören, because he *burned*.

And thinking about him like this is playing with fire. Do not.

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