The Moth and The Flame

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Summary

unable to find healing in the halls of Mandos, Aegnor chooses to be reborn. While wandering the modern world of Man, he finds that he is not as alone as he first thought when he discovers a young woman who could be the reincarnation of Andreth.
Chapter 1

Something moves beside him. A voice, soft words in the dark that wisp against his skin . . . if he had skin.

It never ceases to amuse him how he can still hold on to the corporeal after all this time. But then time has no meaning here. Here there is no time, no substance. There is no pain. Perhaps he continues to hold on to the idea of form in a vain attempt to continue to have some sort of feeling. To feel anything. But that is just not the case. Not here. Never again.

_The voice whispers near him again, soft and delicate, gentle touch from the nothing._

_It was silly for him to continue to think of himself as a being of matter. It is a foolish thing to hold on to and yet he could not stop himself. Perhaps out of habit. Perhaps out of stubbornness._

_Stubborn, the voice caresses, like all your kin._

_Well, he supposed that was as good an answer as any._

_The wisp wound around him, almost like an embrace, if he could remember what that was like._

_He could almost imagine his physical form as it would recline back, his eyes closed. But he had no form. He had no eyes. For what did the dead need to see? He simply existed now. Shapeless. Formless. Much like the space in which he had chosen to exist._

_And yet, there was something so familiar about the presence that moved about him, something so comforting. If only he could remember what comfort felt like. But he had forsaken such feelings a long time ago. They were meaningless without her after all._

_No! The memories! Always there, waiting. In the dark they implore, begging him to turn! Stars reflected in the water. Her face in the dim light. But he will not turn. Never again. He will never feel the pain again. But what is pain? Here there is no time, no substance. There is no pain._

_He twists away from the force around him, but it does not recoil as he had hoped. He can feel the eyes are watching in case he loses himself again. Like a patient mother to her unruly child, it brushes against his being once more, surrounding him._

_Aikanáro, the voice cooed, you have a choice before you._

He stares out the window, the cool slate grey of the first morning light filling the sky.

It had been quite startling at first, returning after all those years, no, all those centuries. Hundreds of thousands of centuries. He was not sure it could really even be counted. The land was far different from what he remember of course. Námo had warned him that the world had much changed from when he had last held physical form. The dominion of Man was upon the lands now and they would hold sway till the Breaking. Beleriand had been completely lost, along with so many other things. Replaced with the realm of Middle Earth which only faced its’ own peril to be shaped and twisted and changed once more. His people had fled. Returning to the blessed lands
across the sea. The few that remained disappearing into the shadows of lore or fading quietly away. Or perhaps some still held on for surely he could not be the only one.

He walked silently throughout the ages as this world turned.

How curious men would become. Their lust for conquest seemingly even more unquenchable as time continued on. Progress it was called. Progress. And he had progressed right along with them. He swirled the hot liquid in his mug as he continued to look out the window lost in thought.

He had wandered for some time after his re-embodiment. He found that he could blend quite easily for one thing had not changed despite the long crawl of time, war still raged. Once all of the dark creatures and monsters had been driven out men, in their quest for power turned on each other. Waging wars over lands and religion, making the need for soldiers a constant through several lifetimes. And Aegnor was able to find a place throughout, all the while never truly finding peace.

He served under Archelous I and Alexander the Great. He saw the fall of Troy and the battle of Thermopylae. He served under the rule of Hadrian and saw the rise of Christianity with Constantine. He followed the teachings of Faxian and witnessed the rule of the great Southern Dynasties of China. It was sometime during his service to Philip III of France when he began to first feel it was an empty existence and although he had never been gifted with the foresight, he felt as if he could tell the future for every day was exactly the same.

There was a period of time when he found himself thinking more and more of ages past. And he began to wonder if perhaps there were others that roamed the world like him. It was during his time serving in the first Great War of Men, well, the first great war to the men of this age. They had no memory an longer of the horrors they once faced so long ago.

Regardless, it was during their World War when he first began to believe there could be others. There was a cease fire, and as he sat huddled in the bitter cold down in the trenches, he heard it. A voice that rose up in sad song in the night. A clear voice. A strong voice. A beautiful voice, and when he heard it his startled eyes went wide and his own voice came out a hushed, shocked whisper. “Makalaurë?” The voice came to an immediate halt and the air seemed to become colder.

He began to question if he had made the right decision. He could never return. That was a part of the choice laid before him. But he could fade, if he so wished. It would be simple enough to just let go. He would simply become one with the earth once more and become what he once was, formless and free from pain, from the gnawing loneliness that seemed to try to consume him from time to time. But what was the point? He would never see any of his family again, all having elected to become re-embodied and remain in Aman. And although all he felt throughout many of his days was loneliness and grief, at least he felt something. Only when even those feelings leave him would he begin to have some concern. But for now he would hold on to the pain. At least it was something.

He sighed and moved away from the window, his bare feet padding on the wood floor, barely making a sound. He crossed the room and looked at himself in the mirror. He had been quite surprised to see his reflection again after so many years. Not much had changed. The old scars were gone of course, no burns.

He winced and quickly pushed the memory from his mind.

But they had been replaced with new scars. Minor ones that had accumulated from the many centuries of this new life. He had been reckless when he first returned. Plunging into battles with heedless abandon. But with the passage of time his temper had been . . . well, tempered somewhat as he settled into this new age. He lived comfortably in the city. Having acquired many items and
treasures through the years it seemed only logical that he would become a dealer in antiquities. There was no place for a soldier of his sort in this day and age, and this life style was far more peaceful anyway.

Aegnor set down his cup and walked to his bedroom and began to dress. He preferred the casual style of today. Jeans and a clean black t-shirt, some work boots and a light jacket. He raked his fingers through his hair. He had kept it long in the early days, much as he had done in his youth. But now he kept it shorter. It was still long enough to curl over his ears in a shaggy sort of way, hanging loose about his face. He had to keep some length to conceal certain genetic traits. But in all, he preferred this shorter look. It was simple and easy to care for and helped him to blend. His hair tended to grow wild the longer it became and could be a bit conspicuous if he let it.

He walked out of the bedroom and crossed back to the kitchen, picking up his coffee mug along the way and placing it in the sink. He gave another quick glance around the room as he grabbed his keys and headed out the door.

He had come to New York only recently, having spent most of his time in Europe and Asia. Europe had reminded him of Aman and so he spent the early years there. But as time wore on and mankind progressed and advanced, it began to become somewhat more difficult procuring a new identity when necessary. Changing continents made things slightly easier. This century it was the colonies turn. He had to admit that he was quite fond of his little apartment in Soho. A two bedroom on King. He could afford something much bigger for he had acquired much wealth throughout the years and had become very adept at transferring it. But he preferred the smaller dwellings and it was not as if he frequently had company. It was a two minute walk to catch the express or the local and only a few blocks to the small antique shop he now did business with. But although it seemed to be working out well here, he did not think he would be staying for too long. His heart longed for the old countries. The Americas were just too new. He would more than likely stay only one century perhaps, maybe two.

He continued his walk onto Downing at a leisurely pace. He was meeting the shop owner Darshna. She had called him quite excited about some of the items he had brought in recently and had set up a meeting with some students from the department of anthropology from Columbia University to help her to estimate the value. Perhaps he would stop at Mazzas and get her an expresso.

The morning sun was bright when he finally approached the shop. The bell above the door rang out as he entered and Darshna looked up from the desk in the back of the shop and smiled.


He smiled in return and began to wind around the many tables and displays. He was known as Agner Aeluin here. He was from Norway. In this city, no one stood out.

As he drew closer to the table he saw that she was not alone. Two others were huddled around the table with her talking excitedly about the objects before them. He recognized them immediately as the items he had given to Darshna a few days prior. He smiled, these must be the students.

“Darshna,” he says, offering the cup of expresso in greeting. “It is good to see you again so soon.”

“Yes, yes,” the little Indian woman answers grinning. She takes the cup with a little “ah!” in one hand and grabs his with the other. “Come, you have brought something very good! Very good! Very exciting.”

He is still smiling as he allows her to pull him around the table. He liked Darshna. A friendly, kind woman with an open heart. He did not need to delve into her mind to know her purpose. In truth he
did not need to delve into anyone’s mind this day and age for this modern race of Man runs around with minds open and buzzing. Most of the time he had to close his mind off to keep them from overrunning his thoughts with their own. And he could tell right now that she was quite excited. As were the two other persons at the table. He spared them a quick glance. Two young women, one with light hair pulled back and the other with dark hair falling about her shoulders and onto the table as she leaned over to look at the pieces. He could not see the dark haired one’s face but the lighter one was facing him as she spoke to her friend.

“What is this? Song dynasty? It’s Song dynasty isn’t it?! I knew it! And on this coin? Philip II! This must date back to what? 336 – 340 BC? I didn’t even know this existed! And –”

The voice trailed off as he turned back to Darshna who was sipping at her cup. “Mmm, good. You always bring the best. And perhaps even better this time yes? Quite a stir these pieces caused. May be a big collector for this, if they are real.” Darshna grinned up at him.

“Why Darshna, what are you implying?” Aegnor replied playfully. “Have I ever led you astray before?”

“No no no! I never meant to say –“

Aegnor laughed and held up a hand to placate her concern. “Calm yourself Darshna, I jest.”

Her relief was almost palpable. “Good, good,” she smiled widely once more. “The pieces you brought could be quite valuable. If they are able to authenticate we could get much at an auction house. This could be very good.”

Aegnor simply smiled and nodded. They were authentic of course. Given to him by the Emperor Qianfei himself. He was assassinated shortly after. Aegnor shook his hand at the memory. He was sick that one. He was pulled from his thoughts by Darshna who took him by the sleeve and called over to the table.

“Here. You will meet my little appraisers. They are going to help us, for a small fee of course,” she said with a wink. Aegnor shook his head. Darshna would try to be as frugal as possible when it came to pay. He would have to make certain they were compensated properly.

“Girls, I would like to introduce you to the owner of the items on the table. This is Mr. Aeluin.” Aegnor suppressed a grimace at Darshna’s introduction as he turned to face the two young ladies at the table. “This is Ms. Macey,” the light haired one’s mouth slowly became a little O as she looked up at Aegnor, “and this is . . . Ms. Bealor was it?”

The dark haired gave a mumbled reply from where she remained hunched over the table, inspecting a small gold coin with a loupe magnifier.

“Oh, ah yeah, hey, hi,” the blonde said, “Katherine. My name’s Katherine.” She gave Aegnor a wide and flirtatious grin. “And this is Andrea,” when the other gave no response, Aegnor heard a thump from under the table and the dark head shot up with a shout, dropping the loupe.

“Hey! Yes! Hello. Nice to meet you.” She cut her eyes at the fair one before looking at Aegnor. “Andrea.” she said in greeting and then returned to her inspection of the coins.

“I was just telling Mr. Aeluin,” Darshna began, “what you discovered about these pieces. That they could be very old and very profitable yes?”

“Yes Mrs. Patel they could be, but I really wish you would consider donating these to the school. This could be a very significant find. If you –“
“No no,” Darshna interrupted, “we have been over this. Mr. Aeluin and I –”

“I am not sure you and Mr. Aeluin really understand what you have here. If I could –” Katherine interjected. The small verbal battle between the two women trudged on, each one trying to top the other. But Aegnor did not notice. Aegnor could not move. His stomach had clenched and his heart pounded, causing a dull throbbing sound to drum in his ears.

Her eyes.

Striking eyes. Eyes of blue and grey with a flash of green in the center.

Andreth’s eyes.

He could not speak.

He could not hear.

He could barely breathe.

It was her! It had to be her! Standing before him, studying that small coin with the same intensity she had the many books he had given her those countless ages ago. Her face, the hair! It was all Andreth! But it couldn’t be! Andreth was gone, long gone. Passed into whatever realm that mortal death takes. It could not be her . . . could it? It took Aegnor several moments to realize that the conversation had ceased and now all three women were looking up at him expectantly.

“Ah, yes . . . what?”

A collective subliminal eye roll seemed to emanate from the three women.

“I said I am sure you would agree with me on this matter yes?” said Darshna.

The air seemed to become perilous to Aegnor. “Yes? Yes. Of course,” he agreed warily.

This caused Ms. Macey to make a tsk sound as she moved her arms across her chest and her weight shifted to one hip. Andreth – no, Andera – no, Ms. Bealor, set down the loupe and leveled a look at him and once again he forgot to breathe.

“I disagree. You don’t really think that what you have here is nothing more than pure profit do you?” Aegnor blinked.

“What?”

“I mean, you can see that you have something of some historical significance here right? I seriously doubt you would have picked them up otherwise.”

Aegnor blinked. “Well, I-“

“And you don’t really want to just cash this in without finding out just what they are before selling them off to the highest bidder right? Given that they aren’t stolen of course -”

“Wait -”

“- and that we can’t authenticate that these are real are you aren’t just trying to scam people. These are or could be truly rare pieces of history. From a time that many know little about.”

“Ms. Bea-”
“They need to be photographed -”

“Ms. -”

“ – cataloged -”

“ Andr- ”

“and preserved for future -”

“-reh!”

The young woman who looked and sounded and argued like Andreth stopped talking.

“Andrea,” she said.

“What?”

“My name is Andrea.”

“Ah, yes, of course. Forgive me. I . . . I just . . . Andrea.” The name sounded strange to his ears. No her name was not Andrea, not for him. But then, her name was not Andreth either. “Of course we will do these things. And of course you may feel free to authenticate and record whatever you wish, for I will not allow anyone to accuse me of petty theft.” This was true. He was gathering his senses again and for anyone to even suggest that he would have or could have stolen anything caused him to bristle. Those eyes considered him only for a moment. For Aegnor, it seemed like an eternity.

“Cool. Can I take these with me?”

“Most certainly not!” Darshna exclaimed indignantly. “You may do what you need right here from my shop, under my supervision. Who are you to think we would trust you to take care of them? Or return them for that matter!”

Ms. Macey turned around. “Excuse me?!”

“Fine,” said Andrea.

Ms. Macey turned around again. “Excuse me?”

Andrea shrugged. “It’s fine. We can come back here as long as you leave me alone to do what I need to do.”

“I will do no such thing in my own shop you have anotherthingcomingifyouthinkthatyoucanjust -”

Aegnor fought back the pounding in his chest and decided to diffuse the situation.

“That will be fine Darshna. I will supervise. I do not mind. In fact I insist.”

Blue grey eyes considered him once more.

“Okay then. We can come back on Wednesday maybe, after closing?”

Aegnor looked to Darshna, gave a huff and a nod. Aegnor smiled and extended his hand to her.

“I will see you then.”
The corner of Andrea’s mouth twitched in what Aegnor thought was amusement before she reached out to take his hand. But when she did it was like a lightening bolt through Aegnor’s very being and he thought his fëa would leap from his chest. For a brief moment Aegnor thought that she had given pause, that perhaps she had felt it as well. But then she pulled her hand from his, leaving him feeling empty and alone.

“Yeah okay. See you then.” And then she turned and left and Aegnor’s world suddenly seemed very fragile.

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Re-embodiment, Aikanáro thought.

Life again.

But what sort of life could he have? What could he hope to accomplish now? Was not all lost? She was gone. Forever. He had turned away from that path, never to know joy again. What would be the point of returning? There was a time when he used to have a purpose. There was a time when he used to have a voice. It will be harsh. He will be vulnerable. He will feel. There will be pain out there. There is no pain here.

But there is also no love.

You will not be able to return to Aman Aikanáro. The air swirled and two great green orbs formed in front of him. You must remain till your life is taken or till you fade.

“There is nothing in Aman for me.”

The eyes gave him a slow blink.

“I accept.”

The air swirled once more as the eyes dissipated and he found himself moving down a great hall and towards a bright light.

“Why do you bring this to me?” he called out. “Why am I made this offer?”

It was made to all who dwell here, the voice answered, save one.

And with that, Ambaráto Aikanáro, Aegnor the sharp flame, the fourth son of Finarfin and Eäwen stepped out into the light and was reborn.
Chapter 2

5:30 am.

The alarm goes off.

A hand slowly snakes out from under a mound of blankets and struggles as it seeks out the source, knocking over several small items in the process. After several slapping attempts, success is finally achieved and silences falls once more as the hand slowly withdraws back into its cocoon.

She has time to lay just a few moments longer. She was so sleepy.

6:00 am.

The alarm goes off.

The hand comes out from beneath the shadows like a shot in the dark. Striking its target with all the precision of a heat seeking missile. Silence is swift.

Just a few moments longer she thinks, blankets so soft. That was like what, two seconds maybe?

6:15 am.

The alarm goes off.

This time the alarm is taken to the floor with the force of the hand’s rebuke. It kind of had it coming really. What with the level of rudeness it kept shouting at her.

7:25 am.

The sun light is peaking through the window next to her bed, coming across her pillow. Her arms reach out in a slow stretch as she rolls over onto her back. She rubs at her eyes and looks to her alarm clock. Wait . . . where the hell is it? She sits up slightly and looks around its’ usual place next to her bed, finally finding it on the floor. She reaches down and looks at it. 7:27 am. 7:27 am?

7:27 am!!

Shit!

She leaps out of the bed only to fall to the floor due to her feet becoming tangled with in the sheets. Fuck! She halfway crawls for a moment as she continues to propel her body forward towards the bathroom. No time to shower. She has to get to class by 8:00 am. Dr. Rainey’s class too. Damn. She is not going to make it and this will be her third tardy. What the hell happened to the goddamn alarm clock?! Why the hell was it on the floor?!

Shit shit shit!!!

She stumbles into the bathroom stubbing her toe in the process, causing her to smack her knee on the sink when she jerked her leg up instinctively from the shooting pain. She plops down on the toilet squeezing her knee and toe simultaneously. After a few seconds she collects herself and stands up carefully. There is no time for a shower, but that really did not matter at this point. She was wide awake now. She quickly pulls her hair into a ponytail and swipes on some deodorant. She steps out of the bathroom and grabs some pants from the floor of her room and slips on a bra. Her shirt wasn’t that dirty, she only slept in it.
She is able to move around her room in single steps due to the small size. She was pretty sure it used to be a closet but was listed as a room so the small 900 sq ft apartment could be considered two bedroom. Oh well, it did the trick. It was one of the many student housing co-ops offered by the school and a convenient and affordable way to live in the city and so close to campus.

She rushes into the kitchen/living area to see her roommate pouring a cup of coffee. She shouts a warning.

“What are you doing?! We have to go! I am not waiting for you!”

Kate just stares at her.

Whatever. She ran back into her room and grabs her bag, shoving papers into it and shouting over her shoulder at her roommate.

“Just throw something on. We will get there faster if we just walk.” Walk? Run is more like it.

“You should be okay but this will be my third late and he won’t let me in the class. Where the hell are my keys?” Looked frantically around the room.

“Andrea,” said Kate.

“Are they in there? It’s cool outside right?”

“Andrea,” Kate said again.

“Where are my keys!! Screw it. You have yours right? Let’s go.” Kate does not move.

“Why the hell are you just sitting there?! What?!! . . . Wait . . .” she gave her roommate a suspicious look, “did you do something to the clocks?”

Kate looked at her over her cup. Andrea’s shoulders slumped a little.

“It’s Sunday isn’t it.”

Kate sipped silently at her coffee. Andrea’s shoulders slumped more and her head dropped back so that she looked up at the ceiling.

“It is Sunday isn’t it.”

“Yyyyyup,” answered Kate. Andrea dropped her bag to the floor and her arms hung loosely at her sides as she continued to look up at the ceiling. She gave a long sigh of frustrated defeat. Sunday. No class on Sunday, what with it being the weekend and all. Which was why they were meeting the shop keeper in Soho this morning. Kate would often go to that little shop to date some of the items for the owner, to let her know what was worth something and what was not. It was just a little side job for her and a way to get some experience for a possible position at an auction house or museum and credits for her doctorate. She had asked Andrea if she would come with her this morning because of some pieces that she was unsure of. Andrea was working on finishing up her masters at Columbia for history and anthropology and was looking to apply for the doctorate program herself. She had agreed to go out of curiosity. Kate promised an amazing find and a chance to make a little extra cash. And since it was Sunday, and there are no classes on Sunday, she figured why not. Besides, a little extra cash never hurt.

“How long were you going to let me run around like that?”
“I wasn’t going to let you leave,” Kate said sweetly.

“Why didn’t you stop me?”

“Andrea met her roommate’s innocent gaze with a flat look.

“I hate you,” she said.

“I know,” her roommate answered.

She dropped her head down and rubbed her eyes as she slowly trudged back into her room. The adrenaline rush that had her moving earlier was spent and her energy was rapidly draining away along with her motivation. She fell on her back on the bed and listened as Kate shuffled around the tiny kitchen, refilling her cup.

“Look on the bright side,” Kate called out, “you have time to take a shower now.”

She considered coming back with her own witty and slightly vulgar retort but decided that expending the energy was just not worth it. Besides Kate was right, she did have time to take a shower.

She stood in the shower and let the hot water run down her body, taking away the chill in her bones. The small apartment the two girls rented always seemed to be ten degrees colder or hotter than what it was outside, depending on the season. Still, it was five minutes from campus and affordable with a roommate. She could layer up.

She sighed as the steam rose up around her. She suddenly felt very tired. She had to start going to bed sooner. The later she stayed up the harder it was to get going in the morning. Perhaps she should try placing the alarm clock across the room. This way she would actually have to get out of bed to shut it off. She doubted it would help. She could not even keep up with the days of the week any more. She had to come up with something though. This was becoming a frequent occurrence. Even on the nights she would get to bed at a reasonable hour, she would still wake the next morning feeling sluggish and worn, as if she had been up all night. She was not sure why. Kate would tell her that she talked in her sleep a lot. Maybe it was some strange dreams. But Andrea could never remember just what she was dreaming about when she would wake, and besides, dreams could not be what was making her lose sleep. You had to be asleep to dream in the first place. And so Andrea chalked it up to stress and her class load and kept on pushing through.

The hot water began to go, so she pulled herself from her thoughts and finished washing up. Andrea tried to ease her guilt about using all of the hot water with the thought that Kate had it coming by letting her panic this morning the way she did. But it did not really work and she made the mental note to tell her.

As she wrapped her hair in a towel and slipped on her robe she heard voices coming from the kitchen. Andrea made a face. Gabe . . . ugh. Gabriel, or Gabe as he liked to be called, was Kate’s reoccurring love. Tall, dark, handsome and dumb as a box of rocks. Wait, that wasn’t being fair to the rocks. Needless to say Andrea did not like him. It was not because he was dumb (maybe a little) but because they were just so wrong for each other. And just when Andrea thought that Kate had finally moved on he would always come leaching around again. Crashing at their apartment, eating their food, spending Kate’s money.

Plus he always called her Andy. She hated that. He would call Kate Katie as well, but that was for
Kate to deal with. Andrea hated cutesy poo little names that ended with ie or y. It drove her nuts to be called that. And she was pretty sure he knew. In fact she was positive he knew. Prick.

She made the quick dash from the bathroom to her room (which only consisted of a little jump) and shut the door. Maybe if she took long enough he would be gone by the time she was dressed.

Her morning routine was rather simplistic. A pair of jeans, a plain v-neck shirt and her boots. She rarely wore makeup and normally just pulled her hair back at the nape of her neck in a bun or ponytail. Today she would leave it loose. It was long and kind of thick and would take a while drying. She hated the blow dryer. She always had to unplug something else to run it. She gave herself a quick once over in the mirror.

She was not a plain girl. She had her fair share of random boyfriends and so on. And it wasn’t that she was not interested, she just did not have the time. Or did not make the time, at least according to Kate anyway. Her roommate was always telling her how she wished she had Andrea’s eyes or hair or pant size. Which Andrea did not understand because Kate was beautiful. But she supposed they all had their own insecurities to deal with. Kate dealt with hers by dating all the wrong men, Andrea dealt with hers by avoiding them.

Andrea straightened out the contents of her bag which were in quite the disarray due to her haste earlier. She grabbed her light cargo jacket and walked out of her room and into the kitchen.

Only to see that son of a bitch Gabe eating a bowl of her cereal.

“Andy!” he mumbled through a mouthful of food.

Ass, she thought to herself.

“Gabe,” she answered out loud while grabbing a mug and pouring some coffee. She then went to the fridge only to find the milk was gone. She stared into the fridge and squeezed the mug in her hand and listened to jerk boy behind her smack on her cereal that was swimming in the last of the milk.

“Ready?” Kate asked as she walked into the room.

“Yeah, let’s go. I need coffee.”

“I made a pot. We’ll be back in a bit babe, are you going to stay?”

Gabe never turned around. “Maybe, gonna take a shower.”

“Alright,” Kate leaned over him and gave him a kiss. Andrea swallowed the bile in the back of her throat. She almost said that there was no hot water but she knew that when they got back those dishes he used would be just sitting on the counter so she said nothing. Let him find out on his own.

“I’ll meet you downstairs,” she called over her shoulder as she walked into the hall. If she looked at him any longer she would say something she would regret. No, that was a lie, she would not regret it at all. But it would cause drama for sure.

Kate was at her side before she got to the stairs.

They did not really say anything till they were seated on the subway. Andrea pulled out her phone and began to scroll.
“So,” said Kate as she began to look at her phone.

“So,” said Andrea without looking up.

“Soooo . . . .”

“Soosoooo?”

“Oh, please don’t be mad! It’s just for one night. I ran into him while we were out and he had too much to drink and he couldn’t afford a cab and it’s not my fault he dicknatized me!”

Andrea had simply continued to look at her phone as her friend spoke but when Kate got to the part about the penile hypnosis she gave and exasperated laugh.

“Oh my God Kate.”

“I know! I know! I am a horrible person!” Kate looked at her with big puppy dog eyes. “I will buy you some more cereal I swear.”

Andrea looked at her friend for a moment before turning back to her phone with a shake of her head.

“Whatever.”

Kate relaxed back in her seat. “He really is not so bad you know. If you would just give him a chance you would see that he is nice. He has some cute friends too. You should really consider coming out with us sometime. I don’t know why you -”

Her friend went on about the pros of Gabe and his friends and the cons of Andrea abstaining from men for so long. Of course for Kate anything longer than a week is too long. Andrea could not figure out how Kate got any of her course work done with the amount of partying she liked to do. But somehow she always found away. That may be why Andrea liked her so much. Kate did not have a problem working her ass off to get where she wanted to go. Unlike Andrea, Kate’s family did not help her at all with her school. Everything she did, she did on her own. This had always impressed Andrea.

Andrea on the other hand came from a very well off back ground. Her mother had passed away when she was young, leaving her father to raise her, her older brother and younger sister on his own. But they never wanted for anything. They went to some of the best schools upstate. Her sister was just about to graduate while her brother was working in her father’s law office. Her father had hoped that Andrea would follow a career in law as well but was still supportive when she chose history and anthropology, bragging that he would have a daughter with a doctorate teaching at Harvard or Princeton soon enough. Andrea was lucky to have the family support that she did, she knew this.

She was pulled from her thoughts when Kate tugged at her arm. She stood up and they pushed their way off the train. They had taken the #1 down to the Houston Str stop and would walk over to Downing from there. Kate talked about the shop and the owner as they walked. It turned out that the shop owner, Mrs. Patel, did not actually own the pieces they would be looking at but was more of an intermediary for the man who did. Kate had never met him but she had been called in to look at some of his stuff before to give Mrs. Patel and idea of their worth.

Andrea never liked this kind of thing. She likened people like this to historical mercenaries. Hold priceless pieces of history hostage, dolling out only to the highest bidder. If these items were anything like what Kate described they not belong tucked away in some rich jerk’s private
collection but in a museum, to be admired and learned from in a museum. These were stories, valuable lessons from the past meant to be valued and learned from. Not horded and sold and bartered on the market after being pilfered from a dig somewhere.

The came upon the shop and a little woman met them at the door. She seemed friendly enough and greeted Kate warmly. As they made their way through to the back of the shop Kate leaned in to whisper in Andrea’s ear.

“Don’t let her fool you. She is nice until you start to talk money and then it is on.”

They came up to a table that had several items laid out. Andrea suddenly started to become a little excited.

“See?” said Kate. “I told you. I don’t know who this guy is or where he gets this stuff but some of it is just amazing!”

Kate went on about some of the finer pieces, some of the jewels and the jade combs but Andrea’s eyes were pulled to some of the glass and quartz seals and amulets on the table. They were different themes with the spectrum ranging from geometric ornaments and astral symbols to elaborate depictions of animals and people. Some displayed praying men in front of divine symbols. Others had a hero fighting animals and hybrid creatures. They had to date to early 7th and 4th centuries BC. They were amazing. Andrea found herself digging through her bag for the jewelers loupe she carried to study them more closely.

Somewhere in the background of Andrea’s mind she could still hear Kate talking. There were some sort of introductions going on but she could have cared less. Pieces like this were beyond rare. Andrea thought they may have been found in Turkey but she could not be sure. To put a price on them would be an insult for they were priceless as far as she was concerned. This was a thesis paper waiting to happen.

A stinging pain to her leg caused her to jump and she straightened up quickly and gave Kate a frustrated look.

“Hey! Yes! Hello. Nice to meet you.” She spared a quick glance to the person she was being introduced to and then turned her attention back to the table and picked up a gold coin that had to be either Alexander or his father. She could have studied them all day if not for Kate and Mrs. Patel.

“No no no,” Mrs. Patel was waving her hands and shaking her head, “that is not your concern. You simply do what you have been asked to do.”

“But Mrs. Patel,” Kate insisted, “you don’t know what you have here. It is not that easy. You can’t just put a price on this.”

“Yes you can. You have done it before. You can do it again. This time is no different.”

Andrea watched as Kate became more frustrated and felt herself becoming annoyed as well.

“Mrs. Patel,” Andrea said carefully, maybe if she spoke slow, “what you have here could be very significant. This needs to be studied and -”

“So study,” Mrs. Patel interrupted, “and then tell me the value.”

Andrea concentrated on controlling her breathing.
“If you would just talk to the owner of these pieces I am sure he would understand my concern.”

“Mr. Aeluin and I have spoken Ms. Bealor, extensively on the topic. And I can assure you that he agrees with me. Don’t you Mr. Aeluin?”

Andrea turned to look at the man Mrs. Patel had been referring too and found him staring back at her.

“Ah, yes . . . what?” he stuttered.

Andrea fought the urge to roll her eyes at him as Mrs. Patel repeated her question.

“I said I am sure you would agree with me on this matter yes?”

“Yes? Yes. Of course,” he agreed warily.

Kate took on her pouty stance that she does when a cute man does not do what she wants. Andrea just got pissed and she did not care if it came through in her tone.

“I disagree. You don’t really think that what you have here is nothing more than pure profit do you?”

Mr. Aeluin blinked at her. “What?”

“I mean, you can see that you have something of some historical significance here right? I seriously doubt you would have picked them up otherwise.”

He blinked again.

“Well, I-“

“And you don’t really want to just cash this in without finding out just what they are before selling them off to the highest bidder right? Given that they aren’t stolen of course -”

“Wait -”

“- and that we can’t authenticate that these are real are you aren’t just trying to scam people. These are or could be truly rare pieces of history. From a time that many know little about.”

“Ms. Bea-“

“They need to be photographed -”

“Ms. -“

“– cataloged -”

“ Andr- “

“and preserved for future -”

“Andreth!”

Andrea stopped and stared at the man before her. What had he called her?

“Andrea,” she said.
“What?”

“My name is Andrea.”

“Ah, yes, of course. Forgive me. I . . . I just . . . Andrea. Of course we will do these things. And of course you may feel free to authenticate and record whatever you wish, for I will not allow anyone to accuse me of petty theft.”

Andrea considered him for a moment. She had touched a nerve there, with her accusations. She thought it best not to push him any further otherwise he might take the pieces away and get someone else.

“Cool. Can I take these with me?”

“Most certainly not!” Mrs. Patel exclaimed. “You may do what you need right here from my shop, under my supervision. Who are you to think we would trust you to take care of them? Or return them for that matter!”

“Excuse me?!” Kate shot at Mrs. Patel with an indignant tone.

“Fine,” said Andrea.

“Excuse me?” Kate shot at Andrea with a slightly shocked tone.

Andrea simply shrugged. “It’s fine. We can come back here as long as you leave me alone to do what I need to do.”

“I will do no such thing in my own shop you have anotherthingcomingifyouthinkthatyoucanjust -”

Andrea thought for sure that this was it. They were going to be thrown out for sure but then Mr. Aeluin stepped in and shut the situation down.

“That will be fine Darshna. I will supervise. I do not mind. In fact I insist.”

Andrea considered him once more.

“Okay then. We can come back on Wednesday maybe, after closing?”

He looked to Mrs. Patel for approval and she gave it albeit somewhat reluctantly. He then turned back to Andrea and smiled, extending his hand to her.

“I will see you then.”

Andrea almost laughed at his formality. Whatever Mr. Manners, she thought dismissively and reached out to take his hand, finding herself unprepared when she did.

His hand touched hers and her surroundings seemed to lurch, as if her mind suddenly spun and she found herself feeling dizzy as something within her stumbled into place. She snatched her hand back, not wanting to fall over and embarrass herself in front of everyone.

“Yeah okay,” she said, “see you then.” She turned and headed quickly for the door, Kate scurrying to keep up behind her.
They talked about the pieces as they walked to the train. Kate thought one could date back pre-Iron age and another could be Babylonian. Andrea agreed and thought many could be even older. It was not till they were on the train and seated that Kate brought up the very tall blonde elephant in the room.

"Holy shitballs he was hot."

Andrea huffed out an unimpressed laugh.

"Oh don't even pretend that you didn't notice! That guy was drop your panties on the floor gorgeous and you can NOT deny that."

This time Andrea did laugh. "I am not denying anything. You are right, he is very good looking. I don't know about drop my pants good looking, but still very good looking."

"So you are saying that you are not interested in him," Kate said, somewhat disbelieving.

"Nope."

'Nope you are not interested in him or nope you are not saying that you aren't?"

"I am not interested Kate. I am only interested in his artifacts."

"Yeah, me too," said Kate, leaving no question as to which of his artifacts she was talking about. Andrea just shook her head.

"Jeez Kate, Gabe isn't even out of the door yet."

"Oh yeah, Gabe," she replied absently. Andrea almost felt sorry for him.

The feeling was fleeting though because when they got home the dishes were left on the counter, a trail of water had been dripped in the hallway and dirty towel discarded on the floor in front of her room. Andrea decided to let Kate clean up after her stray and kicked the towel out of her way as she flopped down on her bed.

Andrea felt excitement about the items they had seen today. This could be quite a find and could very well be the topic she needed for application thesis for her doctorate. She really hoped they were not stolen, although she did not think he had. It was not in his nature to steal. Just how she knew that she had no idea, but she did know it. Maybe she had met him before. If he is really such a big collector as Kate has said, they may have run into each other before at some site or conference. That must be it. Just some passing acquaintance is all. That was why he called her that name as if he knew her. What had he called her? What was it? She struggled to remember.

Andreth.

Yes, that was it. Some strange obscure name that he thought he had heard in passing.

But then why did it sound so familiar?

 Enough, she thought, time to get to work. You have a paper due in two weeks and a quiz Friday. Get to work.

Andrea got up, shrugged of her coat and pulled out her work, pushing the thoughts of Mr. Aeluin out of her mind and tried not to think about Wednesday, to little success.
Chapter 3

Aikanáro reigned in his horse to a stop once they crested the hill and waited as his brother rode up beside him. He arched an eyebrow as Angaráto's horse snorted and shook its head as if in a huff.

"You know," said Angaráto, a bit in a huff himself, "it does not count when you take off without warning like that."

"And just what are you implying?" asked Aikanáro with mock indignation.

"Play fair and I would not have to imply anything," answered his brother with honest annoyance.

Aikanáro chuckled as he looked down at the sprawling settlement before them.

"Who are we meeting this day?"

"Ah, Boromir I believe, and his kin."

Boromir, grandson to Bëor, Findaráto's mortal friend, thought Aikanáro. It seems the torch has been passed.

"Is Ingoldo already here?"

Angaráto made a tsk sound. "Yes Aegnor, Finrod is already here." Aikanáro did not miss how his brother stressed the names. "Come now, you are not going to look to cause trouble are you?"

Aikanáro sighed and gave him a sideways glance. He loved his brothers dearly and would follow them into the black of the void itself, and indeed he may already have. But he could not help but be annoyed with them at times. What with their incessant need for formality and daily affirmations from their great-uncle. He did not understand the need. Their names were not even Noldorin they were Telerin in form. But anything remotely resembling Quenya had been banned and he and the rest of his family had respectfully acquiesced to keep the peace. Findaráto was quite fond of this tribe of Men and causing strife by trying to annoy his brothers by calling them by their epessë or speaking in a forbidden tongue would not be very appropriate nor appreciated.

No, it would do no good to aggravate them, which was unfortunate since there would not be much to do period. Whatever kind of trouble his brother thought he would be looking for here was beyond him.

"No Angrod, if there is trouble to be found, it shall not be found by me."

~oOo~

The sun's bright morning light began to break through the cold gray of morning, his skin as it rays shone through the window where he stood, staring down at the street. Life was beginning to buzz below. Men and women starting their morning commute. Traffic began to move and pick up, the rumble of cars and trucks increasing as more and more began to wake and settle in the familiar rhythm of routine. It was the one thing about Men that never seemed to change. Their need in their minds for purpose, for the routine and their strange resistance to change countered by their need for progress. And progress always brought about change.

Normally Aegnor was amused by this. Under normal circumstances, Aegnor would watch the small theatre unfold below and chuckle at how flustered the players would become if something
shook up the routine, staggering the rhythm. Their frustration would come off in waves at any delay or change as they made their way to their destination. And oh how they hated delays.

Perhaps if they had not been so preoccupied with their own self perceived importance they would have taken the time to observe their surroundings. Perhaps they would have taken the time to notice that the figure in the fourth story window in the large apartment in King Street had not moved in three days. But then perhaps they did notice and took it for some mannequin or a play of shadows on the window from the sun, because certainly no human being could stand for three days, stock-still and motionless, frozen in place.

And they would be right. No human being could.

For three days he stood there looking out the window. For three days he stood inert, transfixed by what had transpired in that little shop. For three days hazel eyes haunted him, staring back at him in the reflection of the window. Was this some torment from the Valar? Some delay in punishment for his arrogance all those ages ago? Had she been sent back to remind of all that had been lost and all he could never have? And why now? Why here?

But then again, was it even truly her? Yes, she had Andreth's face and eyes, yes it was as if she had stepped out of some long lost dream, but this was not Andreth. At least not his Andreth. This was a mortal woman called Andrea. A student of anthropology and history. A young woman of this age and not from the past.

Or is she? Could she be some reincarnation of Andreth? Were there not ancient religions devoted to such beliefs? No one, not even Mandos knew what happened to a human soul once it left the halls, if they even came to his halls in the first place. Could their souls be re-embodied, recycled to walk the earth again and again for some higher purpose? Perhaps her soul had been walking alongside him all throughout the ages and he had never known. Reborn into some other body and life till she had finally come across him again, drawn together once more by fate? In that moment when he touched her hand he could have sworn he saw . . . something!

Not that it changed anything. She was still of Men and he Eldar. She would age and die while he remained.

Yes, this was most definitely some torment sent by the Valar.

And it changed nothing.

Aegnor snapped back to life and in what seemed like one smooth motion he grabbed a coat and snatched up his keys. Three days had passed and Wednesday was here. He left his apartment and walked brusquely down the street.

Andrea sat on the train and flipped through phone. She had her earbuds in but was not listening to any music. She just put on the appearance that she was to avoid unwanted conversation. She was not normally such an introvert but you never who you were going to meet on the train. She was too tired and way too irritated to be polite today anyway.

Kate had bailed on her at the last minute. At least according to Andrea she did. Kate on the other hand insisted that she was coming, just that she was going to be a little late and while Kate never gave Andrea a reason why, Andrea knew. Gabe, yet again. Andrea just could not understand what the allure was. Kate is so bright and smart and just has so many things going for her, Andrea could not understand why she would screw all that up for some meaningless moments with someone who had no real appreciation for her at all. Needless to say that Andrea did not hide her irritation with her roommate. This was her gig after all, Andrea was just helping her out. She should not even be
here honestly. She had a paper due on Friday along with a dissertation to finish. She should be home studying. But while it was easy to blame Gabe, it was really Kate she was upset with. Andrea hoped she would hurry up and get her priorities straight.

Andrea stood up as she heard Houston Street call over the speaker and made her way off the train. The sun was starting to set by the time she reached the little shop. She knocked as she slowly opened the door.

"Hello?" she called out. It was not dark inside but the light was dim and coming from the back. The owner Mrs. Patel was obviously closing up and must be in the back somewhere. Andrea closed the door behind her and continued inside.

"Hellooo, Mrs. Patel?"

Still no answer. Andrea wondered if Mrs. Patel would even be here. Didn't the norse god say he was going to come and babysit?

"Mr. Aeluin?"

Still no answer. Andrea stamped down the little flicker of disappointment in the back of her mind with an irritated eye roll. She did not give a damn who was here because she was here for the items, not him.

And yet, she could not help but notice how her thoughts had turned to him a quite a few times lately. It was getting embarrassing. Andrea tried to chalk it up to fact that she was sure she had met him or seen him somewhere before. Most likely a magazine cover or something. She found herself wanting to dislike him out of principle. She would get more done without him around anyway.

Andrea came up on the table in the back with several items laid out on it. A large lamp lit the table and couple more cast a dim light from behind. There was a large magnifying glass and some gloves set on the table. Andrea walked up and rested her hands on the table as she chewed on her lip absentmindedly and smiled down at the items. Yes this was why she was here after all. She pulled the gloves on and got to work.

Aegnor watched the young woman from the shadows. She never saw him as she entered the shop and went to the table. He was just some other obscure object lining the store and he was very good at blending into the shadows and right now he was as far back as he could get. His back against the wall, he watched her as she gazed down at the table, chewing at her lip and every so often tucking a stray strand of hair behind her ear. He thought his heart would seize in his chest. The back of his head pressed against the wall as he tore his eyes away from her to look up at the ceiling. He squeezed them shut as he took in a slow breath.

Yes this was undoubtedly some torment sent by the Valar.

She was Andreth in every way. From the way she immersed herself in the artifacts to the arch of her brow and curve of her lips. It was as if his stomach had folded in on itself as his blood rushed to his face, causing it to feel as if it burned. Pull it together damn you, he hissed at himself. His hands were clenched into tight fists at his side as the old pain threatened to pull him under again. She only looks like Andreth is all! She is not her, not Andreth! Not your Andreth! Her name is Andrea damn you! He focused on his breathing and fought the tide of emotion that threatened to drown him.

Once his had regained some semblance of control he looked back to the table and the young women sitting there. Andrea was picking up pieces and taking pictures and notes on each with her
iPad and phone. She muttered under breath about a particular piece and Aegnor realized she was uncertain of its origins. Aegnor exhaled slowly and stepped out of the shadows.

"Turkey."

To say he may have startled her would be a bit of an understatement. Andrea shot back from the table with a gasp, knocking over one of the lamps as she did. Aegnor moves swiftly to catch the item she had been holding before it hit the ground, the lamp though was not so lucky. It fell to the floor with a crash and Andrea gave a little yelp and jumped again. Aegnor could not help but feel guilty while Andrea felt furious.

"What is wrong with you?!!" she shouted at him in flustered indignation. "You scared the holy shit out of me!"

"Forgive me I -"

"What, were you hiding back there or something?!!"

"No, of course not. I -"

"What the hell man! I mean really!"

"Please, I am sorry. I did not mean to frighten you. Please."

Those eyes studied him and Aegnor found himself fighting for control once more.

"Whatever," Andrea said with a shrug and a shake of her head. "You didn't frighten me. I mean, you frightened me but didn't scare me you just, I mean I wasn't looking and, well, I mean . . . just whatever."

Aegnor watched her now as she turned towards the floor and looked at the broken lamp in dismay.

"Ugh, that lady is going to kill me." She squatted down and began to collect the pieces of broken glass. "She will totally make me pay for this." Aegnor knelt down next to her.

"No, do not concern yourself with that, I will take care of it. I will compensate Mrs. Patel for the lamp as well."

Andrea gave him a sharp look.

"I can pay for it," she snapped, "just not today."

Aegnor suddenly felt as if he were walking a very treacherous line.

"Of course, I never meant -"

"It's not like I can't afford it."

"No, no, I simply -"

"It's just really expensive and I would never buy something like this."

"Yes I understand completely, ple-"

"So for you to imply that I can't afford it is just-"
"Miss Bealor please!"

That came out a little louder than Aegnor had intended, but it seemed to do the trick. Hazel eyes regarded him silently once more.

"Please," his said, his tone much softer this time around, "please, I never meant to imply anything. I was simply suggesting you let me handle this as I am far more accustomed to dealing with Darshna than you. And it was my fault anyway. Had I simply announced my presence then you would never had been startled in the first place and the lamp would still be here with us. Please, allow me to take care of this. Please. I really must insist."

Hazel eyes held his and it seemed to Aegnor that she stared into him. Does she know him at all? Could she know him at all?

"What did you say?"

Aegnor blinked. "I said to please allow me to -"

"No," she interrupted, "before that."

"I should have announced my presence?"

"No," she said again, a little exasperated this time, "before you jumped out of the dark."

"Ah," exclaimed Aegnor, "Turkey! I was saying that piece was from Turkey."

Aegnor went on to explain how the pieces came from the ancient city of Doliche, now the modern city of Dülük. He believed the pieces to be late Babylonian and Levantine. Andrea began to write information down and take more pictures while asking him a constant stream of questions at the same time.

The evening wore on like this and Aegnor found himself almost giddy at times. It was as if they were back in the library of Bëor the Old's great house, pouring over parchment after parchment and talking of the Valar and Eldar and the legacy of Men. They worked on well into the evening this way. Cataloging and discussing the various histories of the pieces. She seemed impressed with his knowledge of ancient history and Aegnor smiled at what he thought her reaction would be if he told her it was because he had been there. He would watch how she scrutinized each piece, pouring over them, dissecting his information and filling in the gaps. He could have easily lost himself, sitting there with her, it was as if he had been transported back in time and he found himself longing once more for the company of his brothers. He would have even settled for several of his cousins. But this moment right here was perfect, for in his heart he began to believe that on some level, she had begun to enjoy his company.

It was the string of swear words that pulled him from his reverie. It seemed that time did not stop for the hour had become late.

"I can't believe I did this damn it! And of course Kate never showed! Damn! It!" Andrea began to stuff her belongings into her bag furiously. "I am sorry but I have to go. I only have about three million things to finish before Friday and twice that much to get done by Monday. I can't believe how late it is. Time flies when you're having fun eh?"

"Yes," he said, "it was fun."

"I'm sorry Kate didn't make it. You shouldn't have to worry about paying her you know. She should have been here. I will start looking up the pieces we have and get back to Mrs. Patel about
how much they are worth. Ugh, if I hurry I might be able to make the next train."

"Wait, no, let me get you a cab," Aegnor said as he turned off the lights and moved them towards the door. "We should be able to get one at the square. It is the least I can do for keeping you so late, when I am not terrifying you that is."

"Ha! Right?!" Andrea laughed. "A cab would be nice."

Aegnor smiled as he closed the door behind him and turned to lock it. "I insist."

"You do a lot of insisting. You must get your way a lot."

Aegnor paused for a moment. "Actually, no. I do not."

They walked in silence most of the way to Demo Square. She talked a little about her roommate and her lack of responsibility lately. Upon reaching the square Aegnor was able to flag down a cab relatively easily to his dismay. He opened the door for her to climb in. She paused before entering and turned to him.

"Do you have Mrs. Patel's information or do I just show up at the shop? I would call but I don't have her number. I guess I could look up the shop number though. I just thought that . . . I don't know, don't worry about it. Kate must have the info."

"Wait," he said, stopping her with a hand on her shoulder, "here." He reached in his pocket and pulled out a card and then grabbed a pen from the cab driver who was becoming annoyed. "This is my number. Just call me with when you find something. Or I could call you if you prefer?"

"Oh no this is fine. I will call you when I have something. Well, later."

He watched as she climbed in the cab and drove away.

~oOo~

Aegnor stood a step behind Angrod as their eldest brother walked over to greet them. Aegnor could not help but grin as he watched him. His long fair hair flowing behind him and in his fine silk clothes he cut quite the impressive figure. And while he may seem very formal, Aegnor could tell he was relaxed and at ease here. Finrod enjoyed spending time within this House. He truly believed in the valor and future of Men. While Aegnor agreed with some of Finrod's views, he still did not believe that the race of Men were key to the future of this land.

After his brother finished greeting them, he turned and introduced their host and his family. Lord Boromir was a large man even by Aegnor's standards. His wife, the lady Eirian in contrast was tiny and fair, a seemingly delicate wisp of a woman heavy with child with two more young children at her feet.

Aegnor could not help but be slightly annoyed at such impudent behavior. To bring children in to such dark times, to have ones family in harm's way, it was irresponsible and selfish to Aegnor. It was unacceptable.

But, as Finrod had reminded him on many occasions, it was also no their customs. Men's lives were fleeting compared to theirs, and if they were to wait for times of peace then the race of Man would not survive. But no matter how many times Finrod would explain this, and he liked to explain things a lot, it was still something that Aegnor could simply not understand.

He was greeted by his host graciously and thanked his hostess for her roof and board. As Angrod
made his introductions Aegnor stepped aside to wait only to feel a small tug on his cloak. He looked down and saw one of the small children that had been at the lady Eirian's feet inspecting the embroidery on his cloak. Aegnor looked up and saw that the child's (a girl he believed) parents were still preoccupied with their guests. Aegnor looked back down at the small head at his feet.

"Ahem," he cleared his throat gently. The little head at his feet continued her inspection of the cloak.

"Ahem," he said again only slightly louder.

This time the little head looked up at him with bright and curious eyes and Aegnor could not help but be struck by the color. They were a shade he had not seen before and seemed to be a mix of every eye color imaginable. They were set into a little round face framed by dark blonde hair, or perhaps light brown hair, or maybe somewhere in between. She could not be any older than two maybe three seasons of the sun. The little face looked up at him and unflinchingly stared into his eyes. Aegnor was impressed, there were not many of her kind who could do such a thing for very long.

He knelt down in front of her, crouching so as to get as close to her level as he could. Her gaze never broke from his. Aegnor was very impressed.

A little hand reached up and gently touched a lock of his hair and Aegnor watched as the child's bright gaze began to study the strands of hair in her hand. She was brave this one. Aegnor was curious to know what she thought but would never delve in to her mind uninvited, especially with one so young. Almost as if she could hear his thoughts her hand let go the lock of hair and she met his gaze once more.

"You shine, like him," she said pointing to Finrod.

Aegnor blinked and then smiled.

"What is your name little one?"

But before she could answer her mother was there, sweeping her up and apologizing profusely.

"Forgive me my lord, I hope she did not trouble you."

"No, no," soothed Aegnor, "she was no trouble, only curious."

The lady Eirian laughed. "Her curiosity will be the death of me I am afraid, for she has no fear."

"Traits that will serve her well I am sure. May I ask her name?"

"Yes of course, it is Andreth. Andreth, say hello to the lord Aegnor. He is a prince."

The child in the lady Eirian's arms said nothing, only laid her head on her mother's shoulder as she stared at him. Her mother laughed and shook her head.

"Oh now she is shy! I am sure that will change soon enough. If you will excuse me my lord," the lady apologized once more. Aegnor bowed over her hand.

"Of course my lady and thank you once again for your hospitality. Lady Andreth," he said with an incline of his head, "till we meet again."

The child said nothing as Aegnor turned to go but continued to stare at him, following him with
bright eyes.
Chapter 4

Her fingers tapped against her phone impatiently. Just a soft clicking noise as her fingers swiped quickly through a series of photos and images that she was not really looking at. Her eyes were out of focus as she lost herself in her thoughts.

*Why am I here? What the hell am I doing?*

She knew very well what she was doing of course. She was there to meet him. Although she was still somewhat confused as to the why. She was almost certain it was her friend Kate’s fault. Their conversation replayed once more in her head.

“Wait, wait, waaaatait,” Kate had said looking at her as if in disbelief, “he gave you his number?”

“Yes.” Andrea refused to look up from her laptop.

“He gave you his number and you haven’t called him yet,” the disbelief in Kate’s tone now matched the look on her face.

“That’s right,” Andrea answered still not looking up.

“Wait, wait, ok just . . . ok wait . . .” Kate sat down across from Andrea, hands rubbing at her temples and her eyes squeezed shut as if she could not quite comprehend or process the conversation they were having. “Let me get this straight. We meet, what is, quite possibly, one of the most unbelievably beautiful men we have ever seen, in our entire lives . . .”

“If you say so – Hey!” Andrea grabbed at her arm where her friend flicked her.

“Oh I say so alright, and do NOT patronize me.”

Andrea closed her laptop and rested her chin in her hand, giving her friend a very flat look. Kate was undeterred.

“Where was I before I was so rudely interrupted? Oh yeah, amazingly beautiful panty dropping boy.”

Andrea suppressed a long sigh and the overwhelming urge to roll her eyes.

“So anyway, an unphotoshopped male super model materializes before us and gives you his number -”

“For work purposes.”

“He gives you his number,” Kate spoke over her interruption, “and you have not called him?!?”

“I gave the info to Ms. Patel. I didn’t see the need to -”

“HE GIVES YOU HIS NUMBER -”

“- bug him with things that someone else can -”

“- AND YOU HAVE NOT CALLED HIM.”
There was a face off at this point of who could have the more exasperated look. Kate leaned towards her roommate, hands extended in a pleading gesture.

“Andrea, he gave you his number. And not just a business number on a card but a number that he took the time to write down . . . TO. WRITE. DOWN. He knows he could have called Ms. Patel to get the info, he deals with her all the time. Don’t you get it? He didn’t have to do that! He could have just let you drive off but instead he gave you his number!! He so obviously wants you to call.”

The certainty in her roommate’s tone of voice had begun to grate on her nerves a bit.

“No Kate, he does not “so obviously” want me to call. Furthermore I don’t even want to call and even if I did, I wouldn’t anyway because I have no idea who this guy is. I mean, have you even thought about if he was some sort of a perv or psycho or something? This guy could be a serial killer for all we know and you want me to drop everything and call this guy up because he is cute? It has been a while I will admit it but I am not that desperate. And just why would he be interested in me anyway? If he really is the beauty to end all beauties then he can probably get anyone he wants right? I really think you are reading a little too much into all this.”

As Andrea spoke Kate crossed her arms across her chest and studied her friend briefly.

“You know,” Kate said, her head cocking to one side, “we have been friends for like, what? Awhile right? We’ve been through some things together right? And yet sometimes I still can’t figure you out. I mean, do you really have such a low opinion of yourself or are you just playing at humility because you hate having to talk to people. You have to know that you are pretty. Do you not like guys anymore or something? Because that’s cool. I am totally down with that. Just let me know so I don’t keep introducing you to guys you have no interest in.”

Andrea did sigh and roll her eyes at her roommate this time.

“Seriously Kate.”

“I am being serious! Come on! Just call, just this once. If he doesn’t pick up then I will never bug you about it again, but please just try. What is the worst that could happen? He picks up and you give him a bunch of info on ancient Babylonian artifacts? Just call. Pleeeeeeesease? For me?”

In the end Andrea still refused to call. But she did agree to send a text. It was a wonderfully non-committal way to communicate. She did not have to actually talk to anyone and if she never heard from him, at least she had not left some awkward voice message of her rambling about giving a call back later and so on. But she had not anticipated him calling her back almost immediately.

She did not believe it was him at first when her phone began to buzz. She figured that someone else, her father or brother was giving her a call. And when she glanced at the number on the screen she froze for a moment, suddenly uncertain of what to do. Kate had just looked at her questioning.

“It’s him.” Andrea had said with wide eyed shock and Kate mirrored her expression.

The phone buzzed again and before Andrea could register what to do, Kate had reach across and hit accept. Andrea gasped and hissed at her roommate.

“Goddammit Kate!” She brought the phone to her ear. “Hello?”

“Yes hello, Ms. Bealor?” His voice flowed like honey from the other end.
“Yeah?” Her voice flowed like a pile of rocks to her ears.

“Oh good. I received your text but I thought it would better to call. A text seems so impersonal when making plans to meet. I hope you do not mind.”

“Meet?” her voice fumbled.

*Good God woman, get it together!*

“Yes. I was thinking for some coffee perhaps? I would be happy to host you at my dwelling if you would like. Or perhaps we could meet somewhere nearer to you, if that would make you more comfortable?”

*Dwelling? Who talks like that?!*

“Uh sure.”

“. . . well?”

“Well what?”

“Which will it be? Near you or me?”

“Oh! Right! Sorry! Um, me? There’s a place out this way that will do. On Amsterdam at 111th. The Hungarian. You heard of it?”

“I believe so. If not I will find it do not worry. Does 9:30 this Saturday work for you?”

“Yeah ok.”

“Wonderful. I will see you then. Goodbye Ms. Bealor.”

“Andrea.”

“Pardon me?”

“It’s Andrea. Ms. Bealor is my mom.”

*Oh my God I am so lame.*

“. . . yes . . . of course. Andrea. Goodbye Andrea.”

“Bye.”

Andrea hung up the phone and looked at her friend.

“Holy shit.”

Kate on the other hand, literally screamed in delight.

“I told you!” she shouted in triumph. “I! Told! You!” she exclaimed as she jumped up and down.

Andrea did not pay her too much notice though. She was still trying to process what had just happened and was mortified that she had only been able to speak in single syllable words.

But happen it did and here she sat. Waiting on someone she hardly knew because her friend had some fantasy about her hooking up with some beautiful guy she hardly knew. Which brought her
back around to her original thought.

*What the hell am I doing?*

She sat back in her seat and picked at the pastry in front of her. She had chosen this place on purpose. The staff were normally pretty rude but it was usually crowded and full of students. Lots of people around in case things began to get weird. And she just knew that things would get weird.

This was a mistake of course. There was no way this man was even remotely interested in her. It was stupid of her or Kate to even think otherwise. The only thing he wanted was the information she had been able to gather on the artifacts he wished to sell. That was it. Nothing else. It was best to only think of this in that way. Besides, it was not as if she were interested in him either anyway. He was not even her type, not that she really knew what her type was. But if she did she was certain he would not be it. More than likely he would not even show up. She almost hoped he wouldn’t, although not really.

But show up he did and she could not help but become annoyed with herself as she felt a short quick tightening sensation in her chest when she saw him enter. He did a quick glance around the room and walked over to the counter. The barista, who had all but ignored her earlier, almost fell over the counter to serve him. Typical. He smiled and handed her some money as he took the cup she held out to him. And then, without even the slightest hesitation, turned and began to walk in her direction.

Andrea stopped herself from unconsciously reaching up and checking her appearance. He wore a simple v-neck shirt with jeans and a jacket. He had a toboggan cap pulled down over his ears and his hair curled out from under it, framing a well chiseled jaw line. He looked good and she annoyed that he did and angry that she noticed. This time she did reach up and brush back her hair.

He reached the table with cup in hand and smiled down at her. He may not have noticed how many of the people he walked passed had stopped to glance at him (men included) but she certainly did. What the hell was she doing here.

“Andrea,” he said in greeting.

“Hey,” she said back.

*I am such an idiot.*

“No. No problem really. I don’t mind. Really. It’s all good.”

Every time she opened her mouth she could not help but feel more and more foolish.
“So this is what I have so far,” she said, sliding a folder towards him. “Nothing really new from what I gave Ms. Patel. Did she show you any of it?”

“Yes she did,” he said as he opened the folder and began to scan the papers in front of him. “Very detailed and mostly accurate. They should come in handy at auction.”

Andrea’s brow furrowed slightly.

“Wait, you mean Ms. Patel has already given you all of this? And what do you mean mostly accurate?”

Aegnor smiled as he continued to read the papers and answered her without looking up.

“I mean that much of the information you were able to collect was correct with only a few slight discrepancies. But nothing to be concerned over. I am certain the auction house will accept it as fact. And yes, Ms. Patel has already given me all of this.”

Any fascination Andrea had over Mr. Aeluin slowly began to drain away as her blood began to slowly burn.

“Nothing to be concerned over? I can promise you that I am not concerned at all because everything in there is accurate and I would like to see you prove these slight discrepancies that you seem to think exist. I have carefully and thoroughly researched every artifact on that list Mr. Aeluin and I can assure you that there is absolutely no cause for concern for you or me or anyone else. If you like to check the references on this because there is a list of them that cover several pages. Is that why you wanted to meet me? To discuss discrepancies? If so then let’s go. Ask away.”

Andrea stopped and waited. As she spoke Aegnor leaned back in his chair and watched her intently and Andrea could not help but notice that there was something peculiar about his eyes. Something she could not quite put a finger on. Something about them made her feel as if he did not look at her as much as he looked into her. But she refused to look away and stared right back into their disconcerting light. After a moment he spoke.

“I have offended you. Forgive me, that was not my intent. The discrepancies I so thoughtlessly spoke of were from more of a personal experience standpoint and not one based on research of historical fact. I apologize. I should have been clearer. Please.”

Andrea shrugged and pushed a lock of hair behind her ear.

“I’m not offended. I never said I was offended. But if you have some questions then just ask. I would be more than happy to tell you what I know. You said you were speaking from personal experience. Were you at the dig sites for some of these?”

Aegnor blinked.

“Yes. That is exactly what I meant. Perhaps I was misinformed of their origin.”

“That could happen,” Andrea said as she picked at a piece of the pastry in front of her, “a lot of artifacts have origins in one place but have found a final resting place in another. Whether from raids or trade or just the passing of time and sediment I suppose. Which ones do you have questions about?”

They would spend the rest of their time discussing individual pieces of particular value and interest. There were some that Andrea felt would hold no particular value to anyone except for
museums and tried to persuade Aegnor to donate those and was pleased when he agreed. Others she felt he would not change his mind on and knew those would go to auction and so would only give him an approximate value. She found herself sneaking glances at him every so often as they spoke over the papers before them. There was something there that she recognized, something that seemed so familiar to her but just out of her reach. She could not place what it was. They were interrupted every so often by the barista who kept coming over to see if he needed a refill and Andrea found herself irritated at the woman’s persistence and pleased that he never even noticed her. She really needed to get a grip on herself.

And so she focused on the topic at hand and tried to keep from noticing how close they were when he would lean in to look at something she was referencing. But she was in her element here, and could control the conversation easily. She also would easily lose track of the time.

It was a text from Kate asking her how it was going that pulled her attention to the time. It was well after noon. She had been talking about this for hours.

“Oh my God look at the time!” she exclaimed and began to gather her things. “I had no idea what time it was. I can’t believe how long I was at this! I am so sorry about that. I never meant to keep you so long.”

“No, it is no problem really, I do not mind at all. I had not noticed the time either. Do you have somewhere you have to be?”

“Just lunch,” she said, “with my roommate. She is going to give me so much grief. Usually she is the one who is late and I am the one waiting. She is never going to let this one go. She has been waiting a long time for this opportunity.” Andrea reached into her bag and grabbed her wallet to leave some change for a tip but Aegnor stopped her.

“No, let me,” he dropped a couple of dollars on the table before Andrea could object and stood up and waited. Andrea grabbed a dollar from her bag and set it on the table anyway and began to make her way for the door as Aegnor followed. Upon reaching the exit the girl behind the counter called out to come back soon. Andrea almost laughed out loud.

“I have to bring you here with me more often,” she said with a smile as they walked outside and made their way down the side walk, “that was the best service ever.”

“It would be my pleasure to join you anytime you want,” he smiled back. This time Andrea did laugh.

“You liked the four dollar coffee that much?”

“I liked the company even more.”

Andrea stopped laughing and stopped walking. They were only a few blocks from her apartment and although they had a relatively pleasant day together, she was not sure if she wanted him to know where she lived. They were standing in front of the train stop and he could either take the train or a cab to wherever he needed to go.

She stared at him again, at his eyes, and felt that same nagging feeling as she had before. Something tugged at the corners of her mind, something that moved in the peripheral of her memory, just out of her sight, slipping away whenever she attempted to grab at it. Everything about him seemed so strange while at the same time seemed so familiar.

“Well, this is the last train station for another block or so unless you want to take a cab of course. I
need to go this way so . . .”

“Oh,” he said with a blink of those strange eyes of his, “yes. Thank you again for meeting me. If you should find anything else . . .”

“I will call you, yes, absolutely.”

He stood there for another moment before extending his hand out to her.

“Goodbye Andrea,” he said.

Andrea reached out and took his hand and for a brief flashing moment almost had it. That pull of memory almost coming into the open only to retreat into the shadows just as quickly.

“Mr. Aeluin,” she said still holding onto his hand.

“Yes,” he answered, strange eyes trying to engulf her.

“If you had already gotten this information from Ms. Patel, why did you want to meet?”

He paused before he spoke and Andrea thought that his eyes seem to soften slightly.

“Agner,” he said.

“What?”

“Call me Agner. Mr. Aeluin is … my father.”

“Right,” she said with a small half smile. “Agner. Is there a reason you wanted to meet.”

His mouth curved into a smile.

“Why to meet you of course.” He let go of her hand. Andrea spoke before she even realized she had.

“Would you like to go get a drink sometime?”

His head tilted slightly to the side as he looked at her, his smile widening.

“I would like that very much.” He gave a little nod of his head and turned once more, making his way down the street.

*What the hell am I doing.*
Chapter 5

Andrea stood up as the train came up on the station for Bryant park. This was not an area of the city she normally came too but was making an exception tonight. They had agreed to meet somewhere in midtown as that would be half way between for the both of them to meet. Kate had recommended a bar called the Cellar located at one of the hotels down there. Andrea had never been before and hoped it would be a decent location. With Kate it could go either way.

Agner had offered to pick her up but Andrea just was not sure about letting him know where she lives yet. Kate thought she was being more than a little paranoid.

"Andrea, as impressive as your stranger danger skills are, there are times when you really need to chill . . . seriously."

Andrea got off the train and headed up the stairs to the street. She supposed that her roommate was right, she could take it down a notch or two. Upon reaching the street she stopped and checked her reflection in the window of a building. It has been a while since she had gone out on anything even resembling a date and was hesitant to even call tonight one. Kate, on the other hand, had no such qualms.

"Ok, let's see," she had said as she rummaged through Andrea's closet, "you want to be sexy but not slutty soooo . . ."

Andrea sat on her bed and wrapped her hair up in a towel after just getting out of the shower. Clothes had been spread out all over her bed and she had to push them out of the way just to sit down.

"You want to wear something that hugs the right curves but is easy to get off -"

Andrea sighed.

"I grabbed some cute underwear for you just in case things go really reeeeaally well," Kate said with a grin. "I have a cute little skirt you can borrow."

"That won't be necessary," Andrea said as she tossed aside the black panties on the bed.

Kate turned around and gave Andrea a stern look.

"You didn't shave your legs did you."

"Nnnnnnnope."

"AArgh!" Kate threw her hands up in the air and dropped dramatically down in the chair at Andrea's desk. "Really Andrea?! Really?!!"

Andrea had always found that the best form of birth control out there was a couple days' worth of growth on your legs to keep you from doing something you might regret in the morning. And Andrea had no intention of regretting anything in the morning.

"Yes Kate, really," she answered as she picked up a top and placed it back on a hanger as she moved towards her closet. "I will be coming home and I will be coming home alone so just drop it."
Kate sulked in the corner for a moment before getting up to plop down on the bed and giving Andrea an imploring look.

"Andrea please," she said grabbing at her hand, "pleeeeeease, just promise me you will try to have a good time ok? Don't try to ruin it, ok?"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, don't go in there and sabotage yourself by talking yourself out of even the possibility of something happening. Just try to have fun you know? Have some drinks, laugh, flirt maybe even get laid! Or don't! I don't know! Just don't shut it down before anything can even get started as per usual."

Andrea looked at her friend like she was crazy. "What are you even talking about? I don't do that at all! I am not even planning on kissing this guy much less sleeping with him! I don't even know him."

"Are you going to get to know him?"

"I'm meeting him out aren't I?"

"Is that a yes?"

"No! I mean yes! I mean . . . ah! I don't know! What the hell Kate? I have a million things going on in my head right now you know? Are you trying to stress me out or what?!"

Andrea rubbed at the space between her eyes. She was not sure what was going on tonight with her. She had been thinking about this night so much that it had started to affect her sleep. She had been having weird dreams ever since that day they got coffee together. Strange dreams that consisted of her running, always running as hard as she can but getting nowhere. And in front of her is some light. She does not know what is in the light, just that she has to get to it because for some reason she knows that if she does not get to it then something terrible will happen. But the harder she tries the further it moves away. And so she becomes desperate and tries harder but still cannot go anywhere. It is as if she is running under water and she is reaching and reaching and getting no closer and then she wakes up, her face wet with tears and sweat and she does not know why.

Kate stared at her for a moment, her eyes going wide.

"Holy shit."

"What?"

"You like him don't you?"

Andrea rolled her eyes. "Oh God."

"You do! You actually like this one don't you!"

"Oh. My. God."

Kate jumped up in triumph.

"Holy shit, praise Mary and Baby Jesus you like this guy!"

Andrea pulled the towel off of her head and began to dry her hair.
"I am getting ready now and you are going to leave me alone. No black panties, no easy to take off tops. Just me, getting dressed, and going out. Got it?"

Kate just grinned stupidly up at Andrea from where she sat on the bed.

"You so totally should have shaved your legs."

Andrea had thrown Kate out of her room after that so she could get ready in peace. She kept it casual but nice. A loose fitting jersey top and scarf with a pencil skirt and booties. Make-up was kept minimal. A little foundation, blush and mascara and a lip gloss with just a hint of color. She was going for the 'looking nice without trying to look nice' look when in fact she was desperately trying to look nice. When she finally finished she walked out to see Kate on the sofa with Gabe. Which was perfect really because she was just starting to think the night could not get any worse. Kate smiled up at her.

"You look good! Doesn't she look good?"

"Yeah, she looks great," Gabe said without looking up from his phone.

I hate you, she thought to herself.

"Thanks," she said out loud and grabbed her keys and headed out the door.

She finally arrived at the hotel the bar was located in and went inside. She was early. She wanted to be there before he came in. She has never been one to do the whole fashionably late thing. She hated being late. She would rather get there early and give herself sometime to get settled. Upon entering the lobby she began to get nervous and upon descending the stairs that lead into the bar, she felt completely out of her element. She had a sinking feeling that she might be out of her price range here and decided to keep tonight to a two drink minimum. Not that she thought she would have done any more that that anyway but looking around the place seemed to cement the deal. That is what she gets for coming to a place in Bryant Park. It was kind of cool though. It had an old world gothic sort of feel, with high arching ceiling and wrought iron work details. Maybe they would not stay long. There was a festival in the park area and they could always head out after a drink.

She looked around for a place to sit and froze. Across the room, standing in one of the more private sitting areas was Mr. Aeluin. He had gotten here before her. That son of a –

She smiled and began to head in his direction only to have him meet her halfway. He smiled as she walked up and she felt that same quick tight feeling in her stomach from before.

"Mr. Aeluin -"

"Agner."

"Agner," she corrected herself, "You're early."

"As are you," he said with unmistakable amusement.

"Right," she said.

"I hope you do not mind but I took the liberty of getting us a table in one of the more private areas. They are setting up for a band tonight and I thought it might get loud."

"No, not at all. That's fine. Let's go."
Before Andrea could move he held his arm out for her to take and it suddenly became her turn to be amused. She linked her arm around his and allowed him to escort her to the table. She had to admit that she kind of liked it.

Once they reached the table and sat down a waiter came by to take their order. Andrea ordered a glass of the house red and Agner said he would do the same.

Andrea made herself comfortable in the large sofa-like chairs and looked over at her companion for the evening. She had to admit he looked quite handsome. But then she knew that already. He was not wearing a hat and his shaggy blonde hair kicked out in unruly little flips over his ears. Andrea thought there might be hints of red, but in this light it was hard to tell. His shirt was a pale blue button down and tapered to be fitted. *It brings out his eyes*, she thought and then felt foolish for thinking it.

"So," she said in an attempt to get a conversation started, "Aeluin sounds French. Is it? But then Agner sounds... German maybe?"

He smiled and Andrea felt that little flutter again.

"Danish," he said, "Agner is actually Danish. But I suppose Aeluin could be French. Its origins are quite lost unfortunately."

"I thought I heard an accent. I couldn't quite place it though. Are you from Denmark?"

"I have traveled so much it is hard to say where I am from anymore to be honest but," he stopped as the waiter brought two glasses of wine and Agner turned to him and spoke as she took her glass and settled back. After the waiter left he turned back to Andrea. "I am sorry, where was I?"

"You don't know where you're from."

"Ah yes, I travel. I always have so I feel that I have many homes. Although I would have to say Europe has always been where I am most comfortable."

"Is that where your family's from?" she asked taking a sip of her wine.

"My family?"

"Yeah, you know, siblings, parents, extended family, do you have any?"

"Yes."

"Well?"

"Well what?"

"Well how many," she asked with a laugh, "What do they do?"

"Ah yes," he replied and looked at his glass as he swirled the wine within it, "I have three elder brothers and a younger sister. As for what they do . . ."

He paused and Andrea looked up at him and began to think that maybe she should not have asked.

"I would have to say that I am not certain as I do not see them as I would like."

Andrea felt she definitely should not have asked.
"I'm sorry."

"No, it is alright. It was my choice."

The waiter walked up again at that moment and Andrea had never been so happy to see another person before in her whole life. *I am an idiot. He must think I am the biggest idiot. And I am. I am an idiot.* The waiter refilled their glasses and set down the bottle on the table and left. Andrea silently wished he ground would open up and swallow her. How could she have known that there was some family drama that had caused him not to see any of them anymore?

"Family," she said trying to lighten the mood, "can be complicated."

He smiled again at that comment and she felt relieved.

"Yes they most certainly can. What of you? Tell me of your family."

Andrea gladly began talking about her family. In truth she would have talked about just about anything to get off the topic of his family.

"Well I guess I am just your typical middle child you know? I have an older brother and younger sister myself."

It may have been the wine but Andrea thought that perhaps he seemed to stare a little more intently as she spoke.

"My father has his own law firm and my brother will inherit the family business no doubt," she said with a laugh.

"No doubt," he said, "and your sister?"

"Beth? Oh she is a free spirit. An amazing dancer. I could only dream to be as talented her."

"You do not believe you have any talent?"

"I guess that depends on your definition of talent," she laughed. "If you think spending every free moment pouring over old books studying and working on a masters on ancient civilizations and history to teach to a bunch of hung over undergrads a talent, well then . . ."

Agner smiled. "That is no talent, that is a gift."

Andrea found herself laughing again. "Good save," she giggled.

*Wow he has a nice smile, oh my God I'm giggling.*

She continued to speak of her family and her love for history. Her father had hoped that she would enter the family business as well but supported her choice and was proud of her nonetheless. She had lived upstate her whole life but had moved to the city about a year ago to pursue a Masters. He watched her as she spoke and she found she could not turn away from the intensity of his gaze and the strange way they caught the light. She reached over to set down her glass and noticed that between the two of them they had almost finished the entire bottle. Had they really been talking that long? What all had she said about her family? She never talked like this with anyone she just met. It had to be the wine. *No more wine!*

They stopped talking for a moment to listen to the small band that had begun to play and Andrea found herself sneaking looks from the corner of her eye at him. There was something about this
man that she just could not put her finger on. She could not shake the feeling that she had met him before. But surely one would remember a face like his and those eyes. Those strange eyes with their unsettling way that they reflect the light.

_No, not reflect_, she thought suddenly, _the light does not come from a reflection but from within! The light is coming from within his eyes as if there were a fire inside!_  

Almost as if he had heard her thoughts he turned and looked at her and she found herself unable to move at all, frozen with fear that perhaps she had spoken out loud. _I have had way too much wine_, she thought.

"Would you like to get out of here?" he asked.

"Yes," she answered.

After Agner paid the tab he returned to the table and Andrea found herself on his arm once more except this time she leaned on him slightly more than earlier. They exited the building and they walked across the street to the park where there was a small art festival. There were street vendors and musicians and lights strung through the trees. They laughed as they walked and Andrea told him stories about how she used to go horseback riding while at home and a love of camping. She casually mentioned that he should come with her some time and when he said he would like that she felt that fluttery feeling in her stomach leap up into her chest, except this time she did not mind it so much.

By the time they finished walking through the park it was late and Agner offered to get a cab to take her home. They rode back in relative silence and Andrea could not help but feel disappointed at how quickly they got to her apartment. She got out of the cab and as Agner asked the cabby to wait for him so he could walk her to the door of her building, she checked her reflection in the mirror. The moment she had been dreading had come.

He walked over to where she stood by the door. _Ok, try not to sound lame_, she thought.

"I had a really nice time tonight."

.Fail.

"As did I."

_Seriously, who talks like that?_

"Well, um . . . I guess I should go so . . ." and then suddenly without thinking she leaned up on her tiptoes and brushed a quick kiss across his cheek. She moved immediately to make a quick retreat but stopped when he took her hand. She turned and looked back up at him and waited. He stepped forward and leaned in very close but did nothing, his eyes searching hers. He stared so intently that she feels as if she is becoming wrapped up in the strange light from within his gaze and all coherent thought is lost to the wind. She pulls her mind together and smiles nervously and in an almost unconscious move, reaches up and brushes some of the unruly blonde mane out of his face.

"You should really consider getting this cut-" she stopped suddenly, her eyes going wide as he pulled back quickly and turned away, shaking his hair out.

"Yes I should," he said as he walked to the cab. "Good night Andrea," he called out and got in the cab and rode away.

Andrea stood there for a moment as she tried to figure out what happened. After a moment she
turned and entered her building. When she got to her apartment she went in to find Kate waiting up for her.

"You're back!" she said brightly. "And you're back alone I see," she added a little less brightly. When Andrea only stood there without responding though, her roommate became concerned.

"Andrea are you ok? Andrea what is it? What happened?!" Kate said as she stood up.

Andrea looked at Kate with the same befuddled expression on her face since Agner left.

"His ears . . . are pointy."
Chapter 6

He looked at his reflection in the window and wondered how he could possibly feel anything other than foolish. Mooning over this girl like some love struck calf. He was making a fool of himself. So obsessed he was with this girl's resemblance to someone who has long since passed. How could he feel anything other than foolish?

He had not been surprised when she had sent him the message. He had known of her interest in him. He could sense it from both women without even having to delve into their thoughts. He had not been surprised when she had answered her phone either. He knew she was there.

He despised text. It was such an informal and cold way to communicate with another. And he refused to begin any sort of rapport in such a manner, much less any sort of relationship.

Relationship? He startled himself at the thought. Did he really believe that he could begin a relationship with this woman? While she is the exact reflection of Andreth, he must still remind himself that she is not the Andreth. Not his Andreth. No, this was a modern young woman of this age and her name was Andrea and she had her own thoughts and beliefs and a life that had no memory of him.

When he had met her at the coffee shop it was innocent enough. He just wanted to see her once more, out of some morbid curiosity he supposed. Pushed by some masochistic fascination in torturing himself with the past. He had spotted her sitting in the back almost immediately and had been amused at her nervousness. The way she fidgeted with her food and the rapid tapping of her fingers against her cup.

He could read her quite easily without even having to delve into her mind. Not that he would without invitation but her thoughts would come across in waves as was the way with all of her kind. She was infatuated with him, finding him a very attractive oddity almost as she would one of her artifacts. Something to be studied and admired and then safely put away for posterity's sake. He knew the affect he could have on the second born. His kind had always been some beautiful mystery of mythical proportions to them. Only realizing just how petty his people could be until it was too late. Which may be why Men had developed reservations about the eldar at an almost instinctive level. She was no different.

It was all quite charming of course. But she was not Andreth. Simply a young woman with an uncanny resemblance. He had resigned himself to this and was prepared to part until he had made the mistake of extending his hand to her. For it was in that moment, in that briefest most fleeting of moments that he saw it. Or perhaps he felt it, he was not certain. All he knew was that the moment their hands touched something had happened, some spark of recognition that flared inside of her and was gone and he could not help but shaken to the core of his very fëa as he stared into her, attempting to grab at the memory that eluded them both.

After he had agreed to join her for drinks, he could not help the feeling of elation that had come over him.

It was her. It had to be her.

It was not until they would meet again that he began to regret his actions.

He was euphoric that evening. He had arrived early, knowing that she would do the same. He became somewhat hesitant when she asked of his family. Of course she would, how could he think
she would not? His answers remained vague and she took there meaning as something else and he was content to let her.

She, on the other hand, spoke freely of her family and the resemblance to Aegnor was intriguing. An older brother and younger sister. Little mention of the mother, primarily raised by the father. A love of education and history, of horses and the outdoors. All could be considered coincidence of course.

He could feel her sneaking looks at him from the corner of her eye and enjoyed her fascination. But he knew that the wine did not affect him as it did her and he thought that perhaps he should tread more carefully from here on.

It was at that moment that her thoughts had come across to him, searing across his conscience like a white hot flame, the light does not come from a reflection but from within!

It had startled him so much that he could not help but look over at her. And she stared right back at him, unflinching, unwavering, just as another had done once so many ages ago.

They had left and he began to feel the same intoxication that she had, but for different reasons. Or, maybe not so different, it was become hard to tell. All he could see was the way the corners of her eyes would crinkle when she would laugh, the way one corner of her mouth would curve up more than the other when she smiled, the way her body felt against his arm as she leaned against him. They walked along the park, under the trees with the sound of music and conversation floating along the air and when he looked at her it was hard for Aegnor to know where or when he was.

Perhaps that was why he become so careless. So caught up in whatever romantic illusions he had painted in his head that when her lips gently brushed across his cheek a grasped at her hand, desperately looking to find some hint of recognition within. It was in that moment, that pathetic, sad moment that he let his guard down and she had reached up to push back his hair and saw his ears.

It was the look on her face that had brought it all crashing down, his pretty little fantasy. The look of shock and surprise to see something that this day and age is considered a deformity. He had fled then, running back to the cab, his heart pounding in his chest.

She is not Andreth. A faint whisper of a memory from ages past perhaps, but she was not Andreth. And what if she were? Did he think that somehow this time would be different? That somehow he could still cheat death? It would come to this one as it does all her kind. Their lives are so quick, so fleeting. He will blink and she will be gone. She will grow old, she will fade, she will die. And he will remain to live with the loss. Alone. A fool to believe that somehow he could change her fate.

No she was not Andreth. Andreth was long dead. He left her to save her the pain of their inevitable parting. That was his truth. He was acting a fool.

Aegnor turned from the window only to halt midstep by the sound of his phone.

"You aren't taking a break already are you?"

Andrea looked up at the source of the voice and smiled. Her friend Hayley was a tiny little brunette with purple streaks in her hair, tattoos on her arms and built like a brick shit house. There was not
an ounce of fat on her. It made Andrea sick. Still, she was a great gym partner.

While Kate was her friend in most of her life's misadventures, Hayley was the one she would talk to for a more balanced approach. It was easy to stereotype Hayley into the wrong category when first meeting her. Her mother was full Greenlandic Inuit. Kalaallit to be exact, while her father was a native New Yorker stationed at Thule Air base. Hayley prided herself on her mixed roots. Going off of her appearance one would never know she was studying social work and criminal justice at Columbia. She was also considered one of the best freestyle fighters in the area. Andrea had seen her drop men twice her size before. They had become friends at the gym and bonded over losing their mothers at a young age. Of course, Hayley's story could be considered more tragic in that her father had died to when she was young and Hayley and her brother had been passed around foster care for the later part of their lives. Her experiences in her youth may explain her choice of careers.

Andrea grinned as she continued to tie her shoes.

"I am just trying to keep you from getting too tired. You're looking kind of out of shape lately."

Hayley smiled and shook her head, dropping her bag down by Andrea before she plopped down herself.

"You are too kind," she retorted as she began to take off her shoes as well.

They would stretch out and then get on the treadmill for some cardio for a bit before Hayley would take Andrea over to the bags to spar. Andrea could only guess that Hayley must love a challenge because she was terrible at this. She hated working out and only came to spend some time away from school and to be with her friend. She had a feeling Hayley knew this though.

They chatted casually as they warmed up. They had not seen each other for a while. Hayley had met someone some time ago and while she had been hesitant at first, now she seemed to have settled in with the guy nicely. This made Andrea happy, and relieved for her friend. She had been concerned when she had not heard from her. But listening to Hayley talk cleared away her worries to be replace with a little bit of good natured jealousy. The other thing that the two of them had in common besides the lack of a maternal presence was their choice in men. Which sucked.

But Hayley seemed happy. She even said she was sleeping better which really did make Andrea jealous. They both suffered from reoccurring nightmares that Andrea had always attributed to the similarities of their losses in life. Hayley's dreams had always sounded more frightening to Andrea, but then she had also been through more when she was a child.

But now her friend seemed truly happy. There was a lightness to her that Kate would attribute to being in love or having sex or something along those lines. Whatever it was Andrea hoped that it worked out and that he was not a complete tool.

Hayley talking about the new man in her life turned her own thoughts to Agner and the strange turn that night had taken. She had not called him since then, getting the distinct impression from how quickly he had left that perhaps he did not want to see her again. And since he had made no attempt to contact her either, why should she think differently? It could just be because she had touched his ears. Although they were pretty strange . . . actually they were really strange. She had never seen anything like that before in her life.

"Watch your target. You're drifting," Hayley called from where she held the bag for Andrea to lamely attempt to hit.

"Sorry," Andrea answered, "sorry. You know I suck at this. Why do you keep trying to teach me?"
"I like a challenge."

Andrea scowled.

"Seriously though. Where's your head at because it sure ain't here."

"I'm sorry," Andrea sighed as her fist made a sad little swatting noise as it hit the bag. "Just thinking I guess."

"Really? About what?"

"Oh it's nothing really. It's kind of stupid actually. Just a bad date. Well not a completely bad date but a bad enough date that I may or may not have screwed up. I don't even know."

"Oh do tell. It couldn't have been half as bad as your form tonight, trust me."

"You have no idea."

Andrea proceeded to tell her of the evening and the buildup of events that led to it. By the time she had finished they had found a seat on the floor against the wall, sipping on a couple of bottles of water. Hayley listened intently as Andrea spoke, the occasional little sideways smile playing on her lips. Andrea paused once she came towards the part of her story that covered the end of the night. Hayley looked at her expectantly.

"Well?" Hayley asked.

"Well," Andrea replied, "well this is where it gets weird and yet so typical at the same time. We were saying goodnight and he took my hand right? And I thought he was going to kiss me for sure and I was all ready for it you know? I would not have complained at all. But instead he just stands there looking at me."

"Why didn't you just kiss him?" Hayley spoke as if she were stating the obvious.

"Well I actually considered it, and when I reached up to brush some of his hair out of his face that is when I saw it."

"Saw what?" Hayley's eyes were wide with anticipation.

"His ears were ... strange."

"... what?"

"His ears were strange, just ... weird."

"What do you mean strange? Were they big or stuck out or curved in some sort of funny way?"

"No."

"Then what were they?"

"They were pointed," Andrea sighed, "like an elf or Tinkerbell or something."

When Hayley did not speak right away Andrea glanced at her friend, expecting her to be looking at her as if she were crazy. But Hayley's expression was surprisingly neutral.

"Tinkerbell isn't an elf," Hayley finally spoke almost absentely.
"No?"

"No, she's a fairy."

"What's the difference?"

"Fairies have wings."

"And pointy ears . . ."

"No they," Hayley put her hands up in the air as if in surrender, "Okay, whatever. Back to the topic at hand. Is that a deal breaker?"

"What?" Andrea said looking confused.

"Is that a deal breaker? You know, something that you just can't get past."

"No . . . I mean," Andrea struggled, "I don't think . . . I guess I . . . I don't know! I mean, you don't think that is a little strange?"

"I dated a guy with webbed toes once," Hayley said with a shrug.

"That is not the same thing," Andreas said incredulously.

"You didn't see his feet," Hayley held her hand out flat on the floor, "like a duck."

Andrea leaned her head back against the wall and looked up at the ceiling. "I don't even know why I try," she sighed.

Hayley studied her for a moment. "You haven't been sleeping much again have you . . ."

"No," Andrea answered, closing her eyes. "It's the same thing again and again. Or at least it was. All of a sudden now, I am seeing his face! I am reaching for him and then there is fire everywhere and what the hell! I am not twelve anymore! This shouldn't be happening, should it? Why him? Why all of a sudden do I see his face there? I don't even know this guy, never seen him before in my life but now it is him I see! It's all stupid and weird and I just want to sleep."

She sighed her frustration. The dreams had always been sporadic. She has had them for as long as she could remember which was around the time that her mother passed away. They had always been the same. There were stars in water and a shadowy figure that Andrea had thought was a prince or something reaching for her and then turning away. And then there was fire and she is running. Running towards the fire and the figure but never getting anywhere. But now her shadowy prince had a face. Every time it was his face. Andrea would wake up almost in tears, gripping the sheets as if her life depended on it.

Hayley watched her intently as she spoke, her expression now thoughtful.

"Maybe you do know him."

Andrea gave her friend a sideways glance but Hayley just shrugged.

"Maybe you do know him. It could happen you know. It's a big city, perhaps you have seen him before or something. I mean, you both seem to have an interest in history and artifacts. Is it so strange to assume that maybe, just maybe, the two of you were at a showing at the same time and didn't know it. Maybe you saw him in passing and thought he was cute and didn't really think about it again and now your subconscious is playing tricks on you. It could happen."
Andrea looked at her friend skeptically. While she supposed that could happen, he really did not have a face that one would forget.

"I don't know Hayley. If you were to see this guy you would understand why."

"So you like him then."

"What?"

"Do. You. Like. Him."

Andrea paused before speaking.

"I don't even know him," she said somewhat dismally.

"That is not what I asked," Hayley said disapprovingly.

Andrea rolled her eyes and pushed some wayward strands of hair from her face.

"Yeah, I kind of do. Or at least I did. After the ear thing I am not so sure he wants to see me anymore."

"Have you talked to him since?"

"No."

"How long has it been since eargate?"

Andrea gave an amused little snort. "Two days."

"Call him."

"I don't -"

"Just call him. What's the worst that could happen?"

"Um, he doesn't answer or call back or -"

"So he doesn't answer or call back. How different is that from right now. And if he does answer and doesn't want to see you then at least you have a definitive answer right? It is not like you have invested and time in this emotionally or anything. You can still walk away with your head held high and we will make fun of him freely!"

Andrea smiled and shook her head.

"But," Hayley became serious again, her little sideways smile becoming thin, "I think he will answer or call back. And when he does, let's plan something, or meet out somewhere and I can let you know what I really think."

"I don't know," said Andrea, "maybe. We'll see."

They got up from the floor and began to gather their belongings to head to the locker room to clean up. As they walked Andrea turned to her friend once more.

"You know, that thing about meeting him before might not be that far off. There was a couple of times when I was talking to him when I got this overwhelming feeling of déjávu, like I had seen
"Maybe," Hayley shrugged, "It could happen. Or," her friend gave her a secretive smile, "maybe you knew him in another life."

"Whatever," Andrea laughed. "With my luck he probably left me at the alter."

Hayley barked out a laugh. "You really need to lighten up girl."

Aegnor watched as his eldest brother gave his final condolences to Lord Boromir. It had been a solemn and yet beautiful affair, fitting of the lady Eirian for she deserved every honor. Aegnor had been fond of her. She was kind and gracious lady and it saddened him to think of her family having to continue on in this world with her no longer in it. How fleeting their lives were. So fragile and delicate. A simple illness after child birth and she was gone.

He looked over at the children who stood behind Boromir. The infant that was being held in the nursemaid's arms gave soft mewling noises every now and then, while the oldest son and daughter stood silently off to the side. Aegnor and his brothers had offered to escort Boron's eldest daughter to stay at the home of his brother Belemir and his wife, Adanel. Boron feared that his daughter would not learn what a young lady needed to know with her mother now gone. And so he made arrangements for her to stay with the lady Adanel, where she could learn the proper etiquette befitting a lady of her station. The infant girl was to remain with her father till she was old enough to travel, or the elder daughter was old enough to return, whichever came first.

It mattered little to Aegnor. It was wise to send the child away. In truth, he felt Boromir should send them all away, somewhere safe. Although where that would be Aegnor could not say. But he could not help but feel some displeasure at all of this. These children should not be put through such trying times. He found it irresponsible to bring ones so young into times so violent. There was just too much evil in this land for them to live the lives they deserve. It was not fair to them for they had no choice.

But then Ingoldo would often say how different the Atani were from them. Aegnor could not agree more.

Aegnor watched as the young girl said her farewells to her father and brother and made her way to the carriage that would carry her and her nanny. The lord Boromir turned to them once more.

"My thanks again my lords. I will now know some peace with the knowledge that she is safe in your company. You do me a great honor."

"It is an honor escort such a precious cargo Boromir," Finrod replied, "you will have nothing to fear. We will protect her with our lives if need be. You have my word."

"May the gods watch over you little one," he called out to the little face that peaked out of the window of the carriage.

Aegnor looked over at the girl. She must be frightened, he thought. She just lost her mother and now to be sent away from her family so young with strangers must be terrifying. But when he looked over at her, there were no tears, no trembling lips or gasping sobs. The eyes that stared back at him were bright and clear and her tiny chin held steady in the air.

Aegnor was impressed and amused. She almost seemed to look at him in challenge, daring him to
pity her circumstance. He found himself giving her a small approving smile.

Yes, she would make a fine lady.
"The word religion can find its roots from the Latin religio, meaning 'restraint', or relegere, according to Cicero, meaning 'to repeat, to read again', or, most likely, religionem, to show respect for what is sacred, and is consistently an organized system of beliefs and practices revolving around, or leading to, a transcendent spiritual experience. There is no culture recorded in human history which has not practiced some form of religion. In ancient times, religion is practically indistinguishable from mythology. Concerning itself with the spiritual aspect of the human condition, gods and goddesses, or maybe a single personal god or goddess, the creation of the world, a human being's place in the world, life after death and how to escape from suffering in this world or in the next. Almost every nation has created its own god in its own image and resemblance. This will be the main topic of research for this semester."

Andrea looked out at the sea of semi-conscious faces before her. It was a full class this semester. But then lectures usually did start out full at that the beginning of the year, only to thin out to the devoted few who managed to pass the exams or make it without to many absences. Andrea dimmed the lights and turned on the power point. This would be her first semester lecturing as an adjunct professor at the university. It was what she had been working towards since she had started school and should be excited at her accomplishment.

She should be.

But instead she allowed herself to be . . . preoccupied.

She did not know why she held on to this resentment for as long as she did. It was not as if she had never been blown off before. And she hardly even knew the guy. It was only one date. One date! Meaningless and insignificant in the grand scheme of her life. And while it was never a great feeling when one was brushed off, she had always bounced back, as dry and sardonic as ever. So why was this time so different?

She had tried to call him after that night and even, against her better judgement and usual cynical habits, left a message. What a horrible experience that had been.

"Hey, so um, I was just calling . . . this is Andrea, in case . . . anyway, I just wanted to see how you were. You left in a hurry so . . . I had a great time and hope to see you soon."

Katherine had stood there shaking her head as the last part came out in a rush and jumble of words. Could she sink any lower?

She had not heard anything of course. Andrea was disappointed in her own disappointment at not being called back. Katherine, ever the optimist said that maybe he was one of those guys who waited three days before they called back, something Andrea detested. She wanted to write him off like so many others but some small, pathetic part of her still held out hope that he was simply preoccupied and unable to call. He did travel, perhaps something had happened and he was called off to some far off destination, unable to contact her before he left . . . or while he was gone because a week went by and she heard nothing. Katherine kept up with the list of various reasons as to why he would not call.

"Maybe he's really sensitive about his ears you know? Like, he didn't want to show you till the second date or something. Maybe he's just really embarrassed."

But then the second week passed and she jumped on the "what an asshole" train and worked on
try to make Andrea feel better. Andrea had simply laughed at the appropriate times, rolled her
eyes at the appropriate moments and answered with the appropriate sardonic comments. This was
nothing new. She was used to it. He was a pretty boy anyway. He talked like a bad renaissance
festival performer. What a loser. She could care less.

But she did care, and it was eating her up. The events of that night played through her mind again
and again. The night had seemed so wonderful, they were enjoying themselves. Other than that
strange moment at the end when she had discovered his odd genetic trait. But surely that could not
be the reason. He had to be used to reactions by now. Unless he really is hyper sensitive about
them. Maybe she had offended him somehow. Well so what if she had. That was his problem not
hers. The last thing she needed was more issues in her life and decided that she was better off
without the pretty blonde who carried around baggage about his ears.

Now if only she could get the dreams to stop.

They had become intense as of late. At times she would find herself in some state of paralysis,
unable to move or call out and yet aware. She would stand before some precipice, facing a sky
filled with countless stars, railing against the wind and rain that battered her. She screamed till her
lungs felt as if they burned, and perhaps they did because a great fire raged before her, engulfing
everything, the sky, the stars, and a figure. This was the part that Andrea found most disturbing. In
the past the figure had always been unknown, a faceless shadow that she seemed to have both
anger and need for. But the figure had a face now, and instead of some shadowy ghost, Agner
stood before her. His hair was long and wild and his eyes were filled with the pain of sadness and
fear, reflecting the light as he stared at her. She could see what he was wearing now as well. It was
as if now that he was given an identity, minor details that had been overlooked came to have more
detail. He wore armor and a cloak or cape of some sort and the way he would shine! When she
woke up she still had the dark spots in her eyes as if she had stared into the sun.

She would look at him and it was if he were a world away and yet next to her in that strange way
that dreams do. Always she was trying to reach him but her movements were sluggish and heavy
and the fire continued to roar between them. And then she would finally wake, feeling bitter and
alone.

It did not make sense. Was it some sort of displacement due to Andrea's own feelings of bitterness
at being rejected? It would make sense, she supposed, if she were bitter. But she was not bitter.
And no one was going to tell her otherwise.

Besides, they were just dreams. Just a subconscious memory of her inner most insecurities.
Meaningless really. She did not have the time to be bitter anyway. She was teaching now. Well
kind of teaching. She was in charge of the lab for the religious theory and discourse. It basically
was a way for future grad students to acquire research skills and so on through a series of "guided
exercises". It was a lot of busy work really. For many this would be a filler course, something
required to fill in credit hours or the like. And Andrea was pretty certain no one else wanted the
position.

But there was still a class full of bright eyed college undergrads eager for knowledge. And who
would not want to know about religion and the theories behind it? Andrea was not particularly
religious herself. But she has always been interested with the study of religious traditions within a
historical context. It was fascinating the influence that religion has held throughout the ages and
the similarities and conflict that arose from its existence. Unfortunately, she was not so certain that
fascination extended to the current class before her. It was not entirely their fault though. She had
allowed her mind to wander as well.
She suppressed the urge to sigh and resolved herself to the lecture at hand. It was not fair for the class to suffer because she was distracted. She chided herself for mindlessly talking through her power point presentation and brought the lights back up as she scanned the room.

And froze.

For in the very back row, off to the far side near the exit, sat Agner.

When the hell had he come in here? It must have been during the power point because Andrea would have noticed him. He was kind of hard to miss. Even sitting he was a head taller than those around him and his shaggy blonde hair curling out from beneath the hat he wore indoors seemed to make him all the more conspicuous. And then of course, there were his eyes. Even from here she could see the way they would reflect the light, almost like a cats eyes.

A slight movement and the sound of someone clearing their throat in front of her snapped her back to attention. As she had stood there, her mouth agape, several students had begun to fidget and look at each other curiously. Andrea could hear a few soft snickers from somewhere in the room.

_Dammit_, she thought, annoyed. What a perfect first day.

"Ah right, sorry. So," she turned and bumped into the table, "shit-, "ARG! "- ok, so check your syllabus and schedules. You will be responsible for a series of activities and will meet here once a week for discussion. If you miss, it will only hurt you, not me. That's all for today thank you."

The abruptness of her dismissal seemed to stun the class for only a few moments before they eagerly began to grab at their belongings and head out the door in the back.

She stood there at the front of the room, her arms crossed in front of her chest, leaning against the table and watched him as he walked down through the exiting throng. She began to feel the start of a slow burn inside of her.

She was angry at him of course. She was angry at him because she knew he had blown her off. Not bothering to contact her after she had messaged him at least three times, which for her was equal to about a dozen since she rarely messaged anyone other than family. She was outraged that he had the gall to turn up in her classroom on her first day, surprising her with his presence and causing her to look a fool in front of her class. She was infuriated that he had somehow found a way to creep into her subconscious and start hanging around in her dreams, causing a serious lack of sleep for her.

Of course it could be argued that the last two were not entirely his fault and that perhaps Andrea was being somewhat unreasonable, but as far as she was concerned, reason had no place here at this moment in time.

But what she was the most upset about, the most resentful towards, is the fact that she felt excited to see him. Her emotions were trying to betray her now, because she could not help but feel some thrill at his being here. That deep inside she prayed that he had some legitimate reason for not answering her for so long. Sickness, work, death, she did not care, just let it be anything other than not interested. It was those feelings that truly rankled her. And she was furious at him for it.

He finally made it down to where Andrea stood. _Ok_, she thought to herself, _just be cool. You are not in the least bit bothered that he never called you. You could care less about his being here. This is no big deal._

"Can I help you."
It did not come out as a question at all and Agner simply stood before her in all his golden glory with a small smile.

"I suppose that remains to be seen," he answered almost sheepishly.

Andrea looked him over, tilting her head slightly as she spoke.

"Are you a student here?"

"Pardon?"

"Are you a student? Did you sign up for this class?"

"Well -" he began.

"Because if you aren't you are not supposed to be here. Classes aren't free and you are taking up time that I could be giving to paying students."

It did not matter to Andrea that everyone had left and they were the only two in the room, she was trying to make a point.

"I was -"

"I would hate to think that you took a seat from a registered student who should have been here but could not."

Never mind that the lecture room can accommodate three hundred people and there were seats to spare. Agner considered her for a moment, his smile never faltering as he appraised the situation.

"I see," he finally said, "I have come at a bad time. I will try again later."

Andrea blinked in disbelief as he turned to leave and spoke before she realized.

"Wait, that's it?"

Agner turned partly around and looked at her curiously over his shoulder.

"What do you mean it's a bad time?"

Agner turned to face her, still looking confused.

"Well," he said, "it is just that you do not seem as if you really wish to see me right now so I -"

"Don't wish to see you right now?" Andrea interrupted. "What makes you think that I don't wish to see you right now? I am here talking to you aren't I? Taking time out of my schedule aren't I? All I did was ask if you're a student. That's it. How does that seem like I don't want to see you? Did I do something to make you think that?"

Agner watched Andrea as she spoke. She leaned back against the table, arms crossed protectively across her chest, her hands balled into tight little fists and her head would do some strange little side to side motion, causing her shoulders to hunch sporadically while speaking.

"No," he answered evenly, "of course not."
"Well, then what is it then? You had to come here for something."

"I was hoping to take you to lunch."

It was Andrea's turn to look confused. And she did. She looked at Agner in utter bewilderment.

"You . . . want to take me to lunch . . ."

"Yes."

"To lunch."

"Yes."

Andrea looked down at the floor. This was it she supposed. The moment she had been waiting for. She could tell him to get lost. She could tell him just what to do with his lunch. Or she could just blow him off much as he had done to her. Tell him that she had better things to do. Things that did not involve him. It was quite presumptuous on his part to think that he could just walk in here and ask her lunch and actually think she would accept.

She walked around the table and gathered her belongings placed them in her bag which she then slung over her shoulder. She turned back to Agner with a shrug.

"I have a little bit of time."

She turned and walked towards the door.

Andrea contemplated the man across from her as he ordered. Just coffee for the moment. Andrea ordered a side of fries with a glass of water. She did not plan on staying long.

"Coffee in the middle of the afternoon?"

Agner smiled and shrugged. "A weakness I have acquired I suppose."

Andrea just nodded slightly as she chewed on her bottom lip and flicked at a French fry. She was aware that he stared at her but said nothing. She hated awkward silences but at the moment did not feel the need to fill it. Instead she chose to enhance it by avoiding looking up at him.

"I enjoyed your lecture."

Her tactic was derailed by that simple unexpected statement as she looked up at him in surprise. Andrea gave short self-depreciative laugh. "Oh? Well at least one person did."

"You draw an interesting parallel between myth and religion."

"That is because religion is myth."

"It is based on myth."

"No it is myth and God the personification of it."

"In your opinion of it."

"From my studies of it."

"I take it you do not believe in God?"
"I didn't say that."

"But you said that God is the personification of myth."

"Yes but you are assuming that I define the word myth as a lie or fiction. This is not my definition of myth in this context."

"Then you do believe in God."

"I didn't say that either."

Agner shook his head and laughed. He leaned forward and rested his elbows on the table. "Now you are just talking in circles. In what sense can a myth be true?"

"Were you even listening to my lecture," she cocked an eyebrow at him and gave a little smirk, "it goes back to our habit of looking at myths as historical events of the past. I consider this to be a mistake."

"You do not believe that the foundations of mythology comes from historical events from the past?"

"Not in their entirety," it was Andrea's turn to lean forward against the table, "I don't believe that early civilizations looked at history in the way that we understand the term. It was not linear to them but cyclical, the past is but a prefiguration of the future."

Agner's face became still as he looked at Andrea. "No event is irreversible and no transformation is final," he whispered. Andrea smiled.

"You've read Mircea Eliade," she grinned. Agner nodded slowly.

"He was not the first to say that you know."

"No? Well he was the first to publish it then."

"I would very much like to hear more."

"There is not enough time between now and my next lecture," she laughed.

"Then perhaps we can make some time?"

Andrea stopped laughing and looked up at Agner. For a moment she thought that perhaps she had stepped back into one of her dreams from the way he looked at her now.

How did you find out about my class?" she asked. Agner leaned back, away from the table and against his chair. Andrea hated the space for coming between them.

"Ah, well you had mentioned before about the adjunct position and so I looked it up. It was not that hard." He held his cell phone up before her.

"Oh, so you know how to use one of those things do you?"

Andrea's tone was light and had a playfully sarcastic tone to it, but the message was clear to Agner.

"Ah yes," he replied somewhat abashedly, "about my lack of response. It was rude of me and I cannot apologize enough. That is the reason why I am here. I did not want to simply call you but preferred to see you in person. To apologize in person. I am sorry."
Andrea leaned back in her chair. That was it? No, I was busy, I was in the hospital, I'm not interested? Just 'I am sorry' and that's it? Andrea waited till the server finished setting down their order before saying anything.

"I thought," she said, looking down at the table with a shake of her head and a little smirk, "that maybe I had upset you."

"You upset me? What could you have done to upset me?" he asked confounded.

"Exactly," she replied. "So what were you doing?" she asked as she dumped ketchup on the plate.

"Nothing."

Andrea looked at him in all out disbelief.

"Seriously? Seriously?! That's it?!" she pressed her fingers to her temples and shook her head. "I seriously don't know whether I should scream at you, throw a drink at you, or just laugh at you. I mean, are you trying to piss me off? I just can't tell."

"I am trying to be honest with you Andrea," Agner said as he leaned over the table and casually slid her drink closer to him, "so I hope you will do none of those things. I also hope that you will allow me to make it up to you with dinner tonight at my home."

Andrea continued to stare at him in disbelief, her eyes narrowing as he spoke. After a moment she stood up.

"No," she said as she gathered up her belongings and pulled out her wallet, "I will not be going to your home." She grabbed a wad of cash and counted out her portion of the bill and a tip and slapped it down on the table. She slung her bag over her shoulder and looked down at Agner. "But you can come to mine, say around seven thirty, for dinner. Nothing fancy to don't get your hopes up or anything. Do you remember where I live?"

Anger nodded.

"Good," she said, "then I will see you then."

Agner watched her as she strode out of the café.

"Were we not just here?" called out Angrod with a chuckle.

Aegnor shifted slightly on the back of his horse. They were on their way once more to Ladros to meet with their brother at the house of Lord Boromir. The enemy seemed to have become restless as of late and Finrod had felt as if some threat was moving across the land. Could the days of the long peace be coming to an end? Aegnor would be lying if he said he did not believe it himself. While he did not have the gift of foresight to the extent that his eldest brother did, he did have it, and his heart had felt heavy as of late.

Something was coming. He could feel it.

He shook off the dark thoughts that had plagued him and turned his attention to the task at hand. They were once more at the home of Lord Belemir to escort his niece back to the home of her
father. Angrod was right, it did feel as if they had just been here. But upon seeing the lord Belemir, Angrod knew that the passage of time had not been as fleeting. Angrod took notice of the considerable amount of grey in the man’s hair and beard from when they had last seen him. The land was harsh on the race of Men. It pained him to see them fade so.

Angrod watched as the lady Adanel and one of her hand maidens made ready the child’s belongings on the wagon. He had tried to take on the responsibility himself and save her the trouble but she had shooed him away with a stern look. He had learned some time ago not to cross her when she was of that mind. He glanced around the yard for the child but when he could not find her he reigned his horse over to where Angrod spoke with Belemir.

"Are you sure you do not wish to respite here tonight and leave on the morrow my lords? You have traveled far and still have some distance to go."

"No that will not be necessary lord Belemir, but we thank you for your generosity. If the weather permits we will reach the Tarn Aeluin by nightfall to camp and then to Ladros by late morning. Perhaps we can take you up on your offer another time for I am certain we will be traveling through here again."

"You are always welcome my lords, always. Although I must warn you that my wife may not be as pleased since you are taking her favorite student with you."

Aegnor smiled as Angrod laughed.

"You may tell your lady that we will look after the child as if she were our own," reassured Aegnor.

"You may tell the lady yourself my lord," called the lady Adanel as she walked over and stood at the side of her husband. Aegnor had always found her a wise and knowledgeable, if not slightly imposing woman. Her long grey hair hung in a loose braid over her shoulder, and while she was not tall, she had a way of seeming like she was standing over you. He and Angrod would often jest at what the outcome would be if they could ever get her in the same location as Artanis. The battle of wills would be legendary.

"Then I shall," laughed Aegnor, "her well-being is now my top priority."

"We'll see," the lady Adanel countered with her own wry smile, "ah, here she comes."

Aegnor turned to see the lady Adanel’s hand maiden approaching on a mount and for the briefest of moments was confused. This could not be the girl they were take to Ladros. This was a young woman, still flush with some youth certainly, but a young woman nonetheless. Her long dark hair fell over her shoulders like a curtain as she leaned down to lay a parting kiss to the lord and lady of the house. Had not the child they left been fair haired? This could not be her.

But then she straightened in her saddle and her gaze fell on Aegnor, and her eyes, those eyes that seemed to pick up the hues of almost every color and were an endless source of fascination to Aegnor, confirmed her identity. Angrod and Aegnor both inclined their heads in greeting.

"Lady Andreth," Angrod called, "it is a pleasure to make your acquaintance again."

"The pleasure is mine, my lords. I hope that my presence will not be a hindrance to your journey."

"Not at all my lady," replied Angrod, "to have any company other than that of my brothers is always welcome as far as I am concerned. You are doing me a great favor with your presence."

Aegnor gave his brother a flat look.
"You must forgive my brother, he has a habit of letting his mouth runaway with him when there is an audience in attendance." Aegnor turned back to the young lady before him. "That said, it truly is a pleasure to see you again."

Andreth smiled but said nothing as she turned once more to her aunt and uncle.

After several more rounds of farewells and promises to return, they were on their way. But once they were out of the sight of the manor Andreth suddenly pulled up to a stop. Angrod and Aegnor reigned in next to her concerned, watching her as she moved around in her saddle.

"Is there something wrong lady Andreth," Angrod asked, his look of concern turning to confusion and wide eyed surprise as she began to hike up her skirts, "are you in need of some . . . assistance?" Angrod's tone was becoming more and more uncertain.

"No," Andreth answered, "no, not at all. I just – oof –", as she spoke, she unhooked her leg from where she sat and swung it around so as to sit astride her mount instead of sidesaddle. Once she accomplished this, she began to arrange her skirts around her seat. "I just wanted to make myself more comfortable for the ride ahead. I just couldn't do that till we were well out of my aunt's eyesight or she would have hauled me back to my uncle's manor and given me quite the earful." She finished arranging her skirts and looked pleasantly up at Angrod.

"Alright then, I am ready if you are."

The brothers looked at each other for a moment before Angrod barked out a laugh.

"I have a cousin you would get along famously with," he laughed.

Yes, thought Aegnor, the little girl has turned into quite the lady.
Andrea took a slow deep breath and hoped her nervousness would not be noticed.

It had been a bit of a stressful experience preparing for the evening. She had rushed home from campus at the end of her day, talking to Kate by phone the entire time. Her roommate had readily agreed to be absent all the while telling Andrea how she knew he would call. Andrea was too distracted to argue otherwise. There were a million things going through her head at the moment. She had to get home, figure out what they would eat, prepare it, and then get herself ready.

There was just one giant glaring problem with all of this of course. Under no circumstances whatsoever could she cook . . . at all. She could barely open a pack of ramen, how was she going to cook? Even Kate had given her an incredulous look when she said she was going to make dinner. And three boxes of over cooked spaghetti later, she finally admitted defeat. She called the Thai Market and ordered the Siam duck and tofu spinach soup with a side of vegetables and rice and then prayed it would get delivered in time.

She did not want to seem like she put out to much effort for this evening but found herself blowing out her hair anyway, with Kate's help. Her roommate had been playful and teasing and offered not to return at all tonight if Andrea wanted. She did not plan on him staying the night. In fact she did not plan for either of them to stay in at all. She was hoping she could find a way to get him down to her friend Hayley. Andrea trusted her opinion when it came to people since Hayley seemed not to trust anyone. Of course she had a weakness for a pretty face much like Andrea so there was always the possibility that it would backfire, but she still wanted another opinion.

Kate had laughed when Andrea told her this and shrugged saying that she would come back around midnight just to be safe. As Kate left they confirmed their usual agreement that, should anything go wrong Kate would text periodically to check in on her. If Andrea did not text back, Kate would come to her rescue.

Andrea had waited till Kate had left before she got dressed. The outfits her roommate had set out for her had Andrea rubbing her eyes in frustration. Short skirts and off the shoulder tops that were more fit for . . . well, Andrea did not know what they would be more fit for. She only knew she did not dress like that. She pulled out a pair of fitted jeans and a simple v-neck shirt. If they decided they would go out she could just slip on some flats and a scarf with her coat. It was fall but it was not so cold yet that she would need to bundle up.

Andrea had just finished getting the food out of the delivery containers and onto plates when he had shown up at seven thirty on the dot, bottle of wine in hand. Andrea found herself somewhat perturbed at how handsome he looked. She took his coat and could not help but admire how he filled out the fitted button down shirt and dark jeans that were cuffed over what looked to be some very expensive shoes. She wanted to hate how effortlessly beautiful he was.

Jerk.

They began the dinner with the usual small talk. He complimented her apartment and the meal. She thanked him for the wine and prayed he would not ask her if she made the dinner herself. It was about half way through when the discussion turned back to their topic of conversation at lunch.

"So," Agner began as he picked up a clump of sticky rice and duck with his chop sticks, yet another thing that he could do effortlessly, "I have been thinking of what you said earlier and hoped that you might elaborate, about myth and religion. Tell me in what sense is God the personification of
"You weren't listening at all were you?" Andrea laughed and shook her head. "It is all so much more than all myth is true as it is that all myth goes back to religion and religion to myth."

Agner smiled as he reached for his wine. "Do go on."

"Well," Andrea set down her chopsticks and reached for her own glass, "all ancient civilizations had their creation myths. The stories in the Old Testament Book of Genesis are a reflection of much older myths that were told in ancient Egypt and Mesopotamia from at least 3000 BC. In fact," she said taking a sip of her drink, "the further back we go the more dominant the creation myth becomes – to an extent that has yet to be fully apprehended by scholars."

Agner leaned back in his seat and swirled his glass as she spoke.

"Behind the creation myth always lies the supreme being, worshipped by the ancients under a variety of names and guises. This great god or goddess – was the creator of all things, and so was the cognate of religion in the sense that He-She bound mankind back to its origins."

Andrea leaned forward as she spoke becoming more intent on her topic.

"Consider the evidence from the world's oldest civilizations like Egypt and Mesopotamia," she continued. "Here, in these creation myths, the great god, or goddess, personifies the formative cosmos or universe and the entire myth of creation and the entire created universe. Here lies the key to the modern concept of God. As the creator, God by definition becomes his creation, sun-god, moon-god, nature-god, river-god, and so on and so on. But He is always much more than his visible manifestations, and he is mysteriously greater than the sum of his parts. His pure essence is said to be the divine soul, or spirit, or intelligence. In this etheric and quintessential form, God was stirred to life, created the universe, filled it, and surrounded it. And so He became immortal, invisible, omniscient, and omnipresent – visible and yet invisible, closer than we can possibly conceive, and yet further away than we can possibly imagine."

"So," surmised Agner, "God is not a person. Rather, he is a personification. He personifies the 'true' story of the creation of the universe and in this sense, God is the personification of myth."

"Yes!" exclaimed Andrea, grinning triumphantly. "Of course, the ancients worshipped God under many different names and images, since each region or city had its own local traditions but behind this multiplicity there was only ever one God/Goddess, and one creation."

"I imagine that devotees of modern day religions would have something to say on all this," Agner mused, watching Andrea from over his glass. She responded with a dismissive wave.

"God did not appear with the establishment of Judaism, nor with the establishment of Islam," she sniffed, "or even with the earlier cults of Egypt and Mesopotamia. No, as the creator of the universe, God existed from the beginning of time, by definition."

"The principle is straightforward enough," Agner smiled "although I doubt many people will accept this as truth."

"Well yeah, that is the difficult part," agreed Andrea, "there are just so many specific points of disagreement between religions. But if all of these scattered truths between the religions could be bridged in the knowledge of one great truth, one great God. A God who can't be the God of one tribe or the other but the God of all humanity."

"And how would you attempt to bridge this divide?"
"The only way to go forward involves going backwards, into the past. If we can understand how religion evolved over the millennia, then perhaps we can reconcile the modern day differences."

"I admire your devotion to faith."

"Oh, well, I am not sure if I would go that far," Andrea laughed, "I just teach a class is all."

Agner looked at her curiously.

"So, do you believe in God?"

"I was raised Catholic so it only makes sense that every day is a crisis of faith," she said with a laugh, "but the idea of a perfect being, all knowing, all loving, all powerful, well, if that is the case and I am not saying it isn't, but if it is then He has a lot to answer for."

"You do not believe that everything has a cause?"

"It's impossible to go backwards to infinity with causes."

"Therefore there must have been a first cause which was not conditioned by any other cause. Could not that cause be the One?"

"The One?"

"God."

"Oh, well no. If you allow one thing to exist without cause then you contradict your premise."

"You make it sound simple," he said with a wry smile. "The ways of the world or laws of the universe have been framed in such a way that stars form and life can emerge. Nature itself is finely tuned for this. Animals, plants, even planets show clear signs of being designed for specific ends, finely tuned in fact. There must be a designer. Could it not be argued that the odds against this happening by chance are astronomical?"

"You could argue anything when it comes down to it. What you are talking about is some anthropic cosmological principle. And if that is the case then the odds against all possible universes is equally astronomical. Besides that principle merely states that if we are here to observe the universe, then it follows that the universe must permit intelligent life to emerge . . . or something like that."

Agner laughed and shook his head.

"You teach the 'personification of God' but believe the contradiction. My mind spins with the argument."

Andrea smiled and finished her wine as she got up and began to gather the dishes.

"I don't know what I believe," she laughed as she scraped her plate and set in the sink. "I would like to think that I have a personal relationship with God but I have a hard time assuming that everything imagined in mental experiences, like dreams or visions or hallucinations or whatever, actually exists. Not everything is a religious experience, especially the dreams I have been having."

Agner rose from his seat as she spoke and set his plate down by the sink. He looked at her thoughtfully.

"I hope it does not discourage you that I believe in the One . . . in God. I myself believe that there
is purpose in all things, divine or otherwise. As for dreams or visions or hallucinations, well, you might be surprised at what one can discern." He took a sip of his wine and leaned against the counter next to her. "What sort of dreams have you been having Andrea?"

Andrea almost dropped the plate in her hand. She had not even realized she had spoken of that. The damn wine! How many glasses has she had? She stumbled over her words.

"What? Dreams? My dreams? I don't know, I mean, they are just dreams that I've had since I was a kid. Nothing to really talk about I suppose. Just dreams."

"I understand if you would prefer not to talk about it . . ."

Andrea glanced at Agner and could see the amusement in his eyes and became more flustered.

"What? It's nothing really, just some dreams I have," she shrugged and set a plate down in the sink. She supposed she could tell him about them, a little bit anyway. As long as she left out the part with him in it. She kept her back to him as she spoke, busying herself with the dishes.

"They are kind of silly really. I am by water or maybe I am in water, or it's my reflection in the water or something and I am surrounded by stars. They are in my hair or they are reflected in the water in my hair, I don't know. And there is a figure, another person who is there, which isn't odd in itself except that he is always there. Ever since I was a kid he has been there. And then there is fire and I wake up," she remarked nonchalantly "Had them for as long as I can remember. I am sure there is some sort of case study in this or something."

Agner spoke softly from behind her.

"This figure, the other person who is there . . . what . . . what does he look like?"

Andrea was glad that she was not facing him at that moment because her eyes went wide as she tried to feign innocence. She had always been a terrible liar.

"Oh, I don't know, just a figure, a faceless, nameless figure. Look, it's nothing really. I've had them since I was a kid. I was thinking, maybe we could – hey are you okay?"

Andrea spun around to face him, desperate to get them off of the topic of her dreams. She was about to suggest they go to her friend's place of work when she stopped mid-sentence. Agner stood at the sink, his fair skin looking even paler than usual and as still as stone. She stepped up to him and grasped his arm, peering up at his face with concern.

Oh God, she thought in a panic, its food poisoning I just know it. I gave him food poisoning.

"Agner? Are you all right?"

Agner blinked and looked down at her. When his eyes met hers Andrea was struck once more at the strange way they captured the light, bright beautiful grey eyes that were filled with light and sadness. A hand that she had not realized that was on her shoulder moved to the side of her face as the other followed suit. Her heart pounded in her chest and she felt her blood flood rush and her face seemed to burn where his hands touched her. Her eyes were locked with his. She could not move even if she wanted to. The light within seemed to hold her fast. They encompassed her, surrounding her and she felt as if he could see straight into her as he pulled her very soul out for inspection. They moved closer and her heart quickened.

This is it, she thought, dear Lord please don't let my breath reek of Thai food.
PING PING PING.

Andrea jumped, startled. *What the f-

PING PING PING.

She whipped around to find the source and saw –

PING PING PING.

-her phone flashing on the side table.

"Dammit," she spat as she ran over to grab it. "Goddammit, sorry sorry!"

It was Kate of course, texting her to make sure that everything was going alright and that she did not need to be saved. Andrea pounded out a quick text telling her she was fine.

"Sorry, that was, um that is Kate, she uh . . . just a sec . . . yes send! Send! Ugh, stupid phone. It is Kate, was Kate no biggie. She was just . . . just uh sending a text . . . so . . ."

Andrea looked at Agner from across the room. His color had returned and he stood now leaning against the counter watching her, his head tilted slightly. Andrea was torn between wanting to rush over and jump him and wishing the ground would open up and swallow her. They stood there staring at each other for a moment before she spoke.

"Do you want to get out of here? Maybe go somewhere?"

Agner smiled.

He had drove so they decided to take his car across town instead of a cab. Andrea almost pissed herself when she saw his car.

"You have a Tesla?! You drive a Tesla?!"

Agner grinned as he held the door for her.

"You should really have more concern for the environment Andrea."

"I like to think I do, but I am afraid concern for my wallet comes first."

The bar that her friend worked at was a little craft bar in Hell's kitchen so they took Columbus down to Ninth. It was not much to look at. Just a little hole in the wall called Valhalla but Andrea knew that Hayley would be there tonight and most likely getting off her shift any minute. She figured they would just stop in, grab a couple of beers, let Hayley give him the once over and then leave. They found a place to park a couple of blocks away and when Agner opened the door for her and offered his arm, she smiled when he pulled his arm close to his chest so her hand was snug between them causing her to lean close against him.

She felt giddy and light and if she were not so desperately trying to remain calm she would have skipped. She almost giggled out loud at how ridiculous she was being.

They finally arrived at the bar and Andrea felt herself somewhat reluctantly release his arm as they took a seat. Hayley was finishing up her shift when Andrea waved at her, gesturing at Agner from behind his head when he was not looking. Hayley looked at her dumbfounded for a minute before realizing who he was and her mouth went into a little 'o' as she held up a hand telling Andrea to
wait just a moment as she finished up closing out.

Andrea ordered an IPA while Agner ordered a stout, surprising the bartender when he asked for a 12oz glass instead of the usual 10oz usually used for a stout beer. Andrea cocked an eyebrow at him.

"I'm not going to have to drive you home or anything right?"

"I feel confident in assuring you that you will not," he answered with a smile.

Andrea was about to retort that she was not so sure when she saw Hayley walking up.

"Oh, there she is," Andrea hopped up out of her seat and moved to the other side of Agner to greet her friend, "Agner, this is a good friend of mine Hayley. Hayley, this is Agner."

Agner politely rose from his seat and smiled as he extended his hand to Hayley. Hayley for her part had walked up with a grin as she looked at Andrea but when she saw Agner, all traces of her smile were gone and she stood there looking at him, surprise flashing across her face as she froze. Agnér's eyebrows rose with curiosity as he stood there with his hand outstretched in the space between them.

"It is a pleasure to meet you," he offered almost as a question.

This seemed to snap Hayley out of whatever had come over her, but she did not smile as she had earlier. Instead she looked at Agner almost warily as she took his hand.

"Yeah," she replied, "pleasure."

She gave Agner's hand a firm shake and released it.

"Andrea can I talk to you for a sec," she turned back to Agner as she began to pull Andrea away. "Would you excuse us for just a moment? Be right back."

Aegnor stood there watching the two women with a perplexed look as they weaved their way through to the back of the bar. What had just happened, he wondered. Did he somehow know this woman? If so he did not remember. She was small with short dark hair and tattoos. He would think that he would have some memory of meeting her. She seemed to know him, or had some idea of him anyway. But she most certainly not know just who he was, could she? No, she could not. He must have met this woman somewhere before but where? He was still standing there trying to puzzle it out when he heard a voice drawl from behind him.

"Well, it is most certainly a small world after all."

The hair on the back of Aegnor's neck rose as he stood there stunned. A million images from ages ago raced through his mind, dragging back to another place in time. An impossibility come back to life, an old life come back to haunt him. He turned slowly around to face gray eyes that were identical to his own.

"Aikanáro," the ghost from his past sneered.

Aegnor's eyes narrowed and his hands tightened into fists, knuckles going white.

"Carnistir."
Aegnor's world spun around him. He felt as if all concept of time was lost and he was no longer certain of his surroundings. The shock from seeing the face that leered before him struck at his core and images of anger, fire, and blood rushed his senses. The intensity of it caused him to take an involuntary step back against the bar. He was amazed and dumbfounded, he was stunned and yet slightly disappointed.

After all this time living through countless ages, after all the ages surviving wars and famine, loneliness and loss, after centuries of wondering and wishing and never discovering any others like him, much less his own kin, he now finds that of all of the beings given the choice that had been offered to him, THIS is the one he comes across.

Carnistir. Morifinwë. His cousin

"Do try to gather your wits about you if you can, you are causing a scene," the ghost before him drawled lazily.

Aegnor blinked and snapped shut his mouth that had been hanging open. He realized that in spite of the countless amount of years that had passed, his dislike for his cousin was still a constant.

He silently sized up the person in front of him. Much like Aegnor, Carnistir had cut his hair although it was still long enough to brush his shoulders, but other than the modern clothing he wore he still looked the same. Black hair, pale skin, ruddy complexion. Even though many had likened Carnistir's looks to his mother, Aegnor had never shared that sentiment. His cousin's expression was indifferent but Aegnor knew this to be a ruse for Carnistir's eyes were sharp and piercing, taking everything in and missing little, just like his father.

Carnistir sat himself in the barstool and gestured for Aegnor to do the same. Aegnor remained standing. If this bothered his cousin at all he showed nothing. His simply leaned back in the chair and laced his long fingers across his chest as his mouth curled into a smug knowing little smile, like some haughty Cheshire cat. Yes, his dislike for his cousin was most certainly still a constant.

"Now let me see, how does that saying go," Carnistir muttered thoughtfully, but then his face suddenly brightened and he grinned widely. "Ah yes! 'Of all the gin joints, in all the towns, of all the world, she walks into mine' ..."

Aegnor still stood there, saying nothing. Carnister sighed.

"Really Aikanáro, if all you are going to do is stand there gawping, then at least take a seat."

The arrogance of his cousin's voice and the irritation at Carnistir's lack of surprise at finding him here snapped Aegnor out of the stupor he had fallen in but disbelief was still the overall emotion. He sat down slowly next to his cousin who sipped nonchalantly from Aegnor's glass.

"Mmm, good stout," he mumbled approvingly and waved to the bartender for another. Aegnor shook his head.

"How ... what ... what are you doing here?"

"Having a drink of course," answered Carnistir with a sideways glance and a smirk.

Aegnor felt the irritation begin to grow in the back of his mind and he concentrated on keeping his
"You know what I mean Carnistir, how did you find me? How long have you known I was here?"

It was now Carnistir's turn to look at Aegnor in disbelief and the look he have him was incredulous, but only for a moment. Almost immediately he started laughing and leaned back in his seat, looking at Aegnor with utter amusement.

"How typical of you to assume that I am here because of you," he said, still chuckling. "Still as vain and presumptuous as ever I see, just like all of your kin."

Aegnor's hackles rose in spite of himself and his eyes narrowed.

"Seeing as you are also kin, I suppose it would only be natural that you are the authority on the subject, especially when it comes to pride."

Aegnor braced himself for his cousin's response as it would no doubt be explosive, but for the second time that night he found himself taken aback with surprise, for instead of the red faced reaction he had expected, Carnistir simply smiled.

"Touché," he replied and held his glass aloft in salute. He drank and set the glass back down, leaning back in his chair once more and gave Aegnor a considering look.

"I am not here for you cousin. In fact, I have been in the city for quite some time with no knowledge of your presence, or your existence for that matter. No, I am here for ... someone else."

Aegnor noticed how Carnistir's eyes moved past him and over his shoulder and turned to see that his cousin's line of sight had landed on where Andrea and her friend stood talking at the end of the bar.

For a moment Aegnor thought he was referring to Andrea and his hackles rose as he prepared to rebuke his cousin, but then something happened. At the exact same moment, almost as if she were aware of his attention, the woman that Andrea was talking to looked up and locked eyes with his cousin. It was then when Aegnor saw it, just a glimpse, a flicker really, completely unnoticeable to human eyes but for Aegnor's glaringly obvious. A flash of light from within. Aegnor's brows came together as his eyes went wide and he spun to look at his cousin's eyes and took note of the light within, seeing it was not alone.

For the third time that evening, Aegnor was shocked to his core.

_He is bound to her._

"Carnistir, what have you done?"

It was Carnistir's gave Aegnor a sideways glance, his own brow arched in challenge.

"Something you would never have the courage to do, or even had the courage to do for that matter." Carnistir turned to face Aegnor fully, leaning in. "What are you doing here Aikanáro? What interest do you have in this place?"

Aegnor sat up straight, pulling back and away from Carnistir in spite of himself.

"That does not concern you," he replied coolly.

Carnistir's eyes darted past Aegnor's shoulder to the two women who now approaching and grinned
"It is the mortal girl isn't it? You have a pet, don't you?"

Aegnor was about to put an end to his cousin's leering face when Carnistir suddenly stopped all on his own. His eyes went wide as he looked at Aegnor and his voice became a hushed whisper that only Aegnor's ears could hear.

"You found her didn't you? It is her, the woman from the Tarn Aeluin? You believe you have found her ..."

Aegnor had every intention of ignoring his cousin at this point. Indeed, he was in the process of reaching into his pocket to fetch his wallet and pay so that he could get Andrea and leave, but what Carnistir had said made it now impossible to leave. How did he know? How could he know? How could he have any knowledge of Andrea or Andreth? And his voice. The intensity of it, the sincerity, things that Aegnor in all of his long life, this one or the last, had no memory of his cousin ever possessing. He found himself answering.

"I ... don't know ..." he whispered back.

Carnistir sat back up, cold and imperious once more as he stared at Aegnor.

"You are looking for answers but there is no time, not now ..." Carnistir glanced over Aegnor's shoulder once more and back to him. "Tomorrow, in the morning, you will meet me. Freemans off of 2nd Ave, between Bowery and Chrystie, 8am."

Aegnor opened his mouth to protest but Carnistir was already gone, having moved towards the door. Aegnor turned back around to find Andrea and her friend walking up.

"Sorry about that," her friend Hayley apologized, "girl stuff."

Aegnor had his doubts.

"So Andrea, call me okay and we will try this again when there is more time right? And we can all get to know each other, kay?"

Even though she was looking at Andrea as she spoke, Aegnor knew it was directed towards him.

After the two women hugged, Hayley turned to Aegnor.

"I look forward to it," he said extending his hand. "Till then."

Hayley gave him small sideways smile as she took his hand and shook it. She then walked over to where Carnistir stood waiting by the door, a protective arm wrapping around her. He never looked up at Aegnor as he left but his voice spoke in Aegnor's mind.

Tomorrow.

Aegnor surpressed a sigh. How typical for him to enter one's thoughts uninvited. He looked over at Andrea.

"Would you like to get out of here?"

Andrea smiled.
Andrea stepped out of the car and looked up at the red brick building they had pulled up to.

"Where are we?"

"My apartment," he replied as he locked the car and headed for the building door, "I have some pieces I thought you might be interested in. I hope you don't mind."

"Oh, not at all," she said following him into the building. That would be an understatement of course.

They rode the elevator to the top floor and the doors opened directly to the apartment. Andrea's mouth dropped open.

"You have a private elevator?" She had wanted to sound casual but the words came out before she could put for the effort. Agner shrugged.

"There is an upper deck as well on the roof if would like to see it."

"Drinks on the veranda? How lovely," she laughed.

The apartment was quite large, despite his insistence otherwise. The kitchen, dining space and living area were combined into one great room with red brick walls and tall windows that looked out onto the street. The walls were not adorned with much. There were some paintings, what seemed like old charcoal drawings of figures and landscapes, and masks that looked to be Korean to Andrea. Two large built in shelves framed the fireplace and were full of books. It was a beautiful room and yet something seemed to be missing to Andrea. A hallway branched off the main room and Andrea hesitated in front of it as Agner walked up and handed her a glass of wine.

"Feel free to look around. The items I wanted to show you are in the guest room. I will be there shortly."

Andrea walked down the hall as Agner returned to the kitchen. She noticed there were four doors and two were open. One was to a bathroom that Andrea enviously noted was much larger than her own while the other opened to the bedroom.

It was a large room, easily the size of her own little apartment, with red brick walls and more tall windows that lit the room in a cool yellow glow from the street lights below. There was not much in the way of furniture. A large, neatly made platform bed was against one wall with a trunk and side table next to it and a tall dresser against the other wall and a large cushioned chair in the corner, but other than that there was nothing else. There were more renderings on the wall, carefully framed with what Andrea thought was protective glass to prevent fading.

Andrea suddenly realized what it was that was missing. While there were stunning pieces of art adorning the walls and hallways, beautiful drawings of faces in profile or ancient figures in shadow, there were no photographs. None. Not a single one. No photos from childhood, no black and whites of grandparents in their youth, or family vacations by the seashore. She found it a stark contrast that for a man who traveled the world the was Agner did, that no pictures of friends and experiences were set in little frames as a testament to the past. Her apartment was covered with photos and mementos from her past and present. Goofy shots of her and her friends, of her family.

But then, did he not say that he was no longer close to his family? Having fell out of contact with them years ago and having no relatives in the city? Andrea frowned a little at that. How sad it
seemed to her to lose that, to have no one worth holding on too. She glanced at the large bed and her mouth curved upwards into a naughty smile.

_Maybe we can make some_, she thought mischievously as she sipped her wine and turned to walk out of the bedroom only to walk right into Agner standing behind her.

"Eep!" she yelped as she held her glass up and away so as not to spill any on her or her host. She felt her face burning and was never so grateful that the lights were not on.

"Oh my God! I'm sorry, I didn't know you were there. I shouldn't be in here should I? It's just the door was open and so I just, I was just leaving and, I love the red brick! Is this the second room over here?"

Andrea made a hasty retreat towards the hall, only glancing back at Agner who followed silently, smiling.

_Good thing he can't read my mind_, she thought as she walked across the hall and waited.

Agner walked up from behind her and opened the door, entering the room and turning on the light. Andrea let out a little gasp as he did.

The room was full of display cases that were in turn full of artifacts. She moved to the nearest case.

"Is this Kybele?"

"Yes, from Catalhoyuk, Turkey."

"And these, are they Bronze Age?"

"From the southern tip of the Shetland Islands, and this," he continued pointing to another case, "was found near the Stones of Stenness I believe. Over here are –"

"Mayan and Olmec. Do you have any idea how old these are?"

"I had some knowledge."

"Oh really," she said somewhat incredulously, as something caught her sight in the corner. "Is that –"

"A statue from the Qin Dynasty, from Emperor Qin Shi Huang."

"You have a terra-cotta warrior from the tomb of Qin Shi Huang? How on earth did you get a statue from the tomb of Qin Shi Huang?"

"I never said I got it from the tomb. It was a gift."

"Oh, so it's an imitation."

"… yes … yes it is."

"Well then that makes sense because there is no way you would get a real one out of China."

"Of course not."

Andrea moved over to the next case.
"These are strange," she commented, leaning in, "What are these, these markings? I feel like ..."

The case in front of her held several swords and blades and what appeared to be a faded map of territories that were not known to her. At least not entirely because there was something . . . familiar about them. Something about the faint writing that marked the map and adorned several of the weapons in the case. The way the letters swooped and swirled in graceful arches, something tugged at her subconscious. Agner spoke from behind her.

"Have you seen them before perhaps?"

Some memory flitted around, just out of her grasp.

"I … think, maybe … I …" she struggled, reaching in her mind. Something from when she was a child maybe? With her father? Or maybe her mother? It seemed as if, she should know, that she had to know. As she looked in at the case her eyes rested on a dried wreath of flowers so old that it looked as if it would crumble if touched.

"You know," she said distractedly, still desperately grasping the memory that danced just out of reach in the back of her mind, "women used to wear wreaths like this in their hair, during festivals or blessings. It would single them out as wise women of their tribes. Although, I think the story goes deeper than that …"

"And what would that story be Andrea?" Agner whispered.

"I …" Andrea stuttered, her head felt heavy and for a moment it seemed as if the world around her shifted and moved, whirling about her like the strange engravings on the swords. She was here with Agner and yet she was not here. Everything about this seemed so familiar but was also so strange.

Andrea squeezed her eyes shut and tried to focus. What is wrong with you, she hissed at herself, get it together! She must have more to drink than she thought, the combination of beer and wine going to her head. She set down her glass on the case and turned around to find Agner staring at her intently. Great, now he thinks you're crazy too. She waved off his concern.

"I'm sorry, I'm fine, really. Maybe you could show me that deck on your roof now."

"Yes," agreed Agner, "I think the air would do us both good."

He set down his own glass and took Andrea by the hand and led her out into the hall. When he took her hand Andrea thought she may get dizzy all over again simply from the thrill of his touch and when they entered his bedroom, she thought she may fall out right there. But once in the room he let go of her hand, and the weight of the emptiness brought her back down to earth. He walked over to one of the windows and opened it and the sounds of the city below came rushing in. He climbed out onto the fire escape and waited, peeking back in to see if she followed and reaching out for her to take his hand when he saw she had not.

Andrea walked up to the window and took his hand, climbing out after him. They made their way up the iron stair case to the roof where a small wooden deck with two chairs was covered by a wooden trellis with plants vining all over it. It was a beautiful view of the city and Andrea said as much.

"Thank you," he replied, "I come here often in the evenings. My favorite place I suppose."

Andrea stood out at the edge of the deck, looking at city skyline, her arms wrapped around herself for warmth. While it had been reasonably warm down on the streets, the breeze on the roof was far
cooler and Andrea had left her jacket in the apartment. The cold did not seem to effect Agner at all however, and she resolved to tough it out if he could, but still she shivered.

"You are cold," he observed and walked over to where she stood, wrapping his arms around her. They stood like this for several minutes, her head resting against his chest, his chin resting atop her head. Andrea was content to stand there, wrapped in that silent embrace forever. It was Agner who broke their repose when he released her. Andrea looked up at him to see him staring down at her in such a way that she felt her heart catch and she thought that perhaps this was it, finally he would kiss her. But then he turned away.

"Come," he said softly, "you are cold and it is getting late. I will take you home."

Agner stepped down from the deck and walked over to the fire escape, leaving Andrea alone and confused . . . and slightly annoyed. She walked swiftly over the escape and moving in front of Agner began her descent first. She swiftly made it to the bedroom window and climbed in before he could offer any assistance. Once inside she made quickly and rather angrily for the door when she stopped. Agner was only halfway inside, one leg in the room and the other still on the balcony when she spun around.

"Did I do something?"

Agner froze in the window.

"Excuse me?"

"Did I do something, you know, wrong?" she snapped again. "Did I say something shouldn't have or not say something should have or do something repulsive that you just can't get past?"

"I am not sure I know what you mean . . ." he said warily.

"Because this hot and cold crap is getting kind of old you know? One minute I think you like me and the next you act like you can't get away fast enough. I mean, is it me? Am I not being clear? Because I like you. A lot. And would kind of like to see where this is going or if it could go anywhere but I have no idea if you are interested. Is it the ear thing? Because if so I am sorry. I had no idea and I don't even care! I like you Agner and I just want to know if you like me."

As Andrea spoke Agner had stood quietly surprised, only moving when she spoke of his ears and his hand had involuntarily reached up to the side of his face. Once she had finished he stepped completely inside the room, his eyes cast downwards as he shook his head.

"No, it is not the 'ear thing', nor is it you. Quite the contrary even for I like you very much. Perhaps too much."

"Well what is it then?" she asked moving closer as he seemed to struggle for words. "Well?" she said again.

"I –" he stammered.

"Well?!!"

"I just don't want you to get hurt," he exclaimed, looking surprised at his own words. Andrea looked at him skeptically.

"You don't want me to get hurt. Why? Are you going to hurt me? You aren't going to take into
some weird red room and give me some cheesy line about how you have particular tastes are you?"

Agner looked at her in utter confusion.

"I have no idea what you are talking about," muttered hopelessly.

Andrea considered him for a moment before she walked to where he stood and took his hands in hers.

"You let me worry about me getting hurt okay? I am big girl and can handle it. Okay?"

When he did not respond she took his face in her hands, forcing him to look at her. Agner said nothing for what felt like forever but Andrea refused to lose herself in the strangeness of those eyes, she met his stare unflinching, only breaking her gaze to take him by the hand and lead him out of the room.

"Come on tough guy, let's go. Like you said, it's getting late."

They rode back to her apartment in silence. Agner keeping his attention on the road as Andrea looked out the passenger window. This is not at all how she wanted this night to end. He likes her. He told her as much. But he pushes her away because he is afraid she will be hurt? What could he possibly do to her hurt other than what he is doing now? Maybe he has been hurt in the past. Some relationship that ended badly with him getting dumped or left at the alter. Well that was in the past and she was not that girl and it was time he realized this.

Agner walked Andrea into her apartment building and to her door to say good night. Andrea placed the key in the door and then turned around to face him.

"Despite what I said earlier, I really had a wonderful time tonight," she said.

"As did I."

"Will I see you again?"

"I would like that very much," he answered.

"Good," Andrea smiled, "so, you'll call me I guess?"

"I promise. Goodnight Andrea," he said and turned to leave.

"Agner?"

Agner stopped and turned to face her but before he could realize what was happening, Andrea was on him. She stood on tiptoes, her body against his as she kissed him. It was a hesitant kiss at first, but when he did not pull away, she became more bold. She reached up and wrapped her arms around his neck as mouths parted and tongues explored. It was not till she felt his hands on the small of her back, pulling her harder against him, did she gently pull away. Andrea stepped back, breathless.

"Well, goodnight," she chirped brightly and went swiftly inside her apartment, leaving Agner leaning against the wall she had pushed him up against, eyes wide.
Aegnor scratched Mithroch under the chin and gave him a piece of the fruit in his hand.

"Mará seldo," he cooed as the grey stallion huffed and searched for more treats. "Mará."

Aegnor gave his mount one more pat and a scratch between the ears before he turned back towards camp. They had made good time on the return to Ladros and if it had just been he and his brother they would have more than likely continued on if not already have arrived. But it was not just he and his brother and so they made the decision to stop at dusk, just north of the Tarn Aeluín, and resume in the morn.

Aegnor passed the small shelter they had erected for their companion. It was not much but it would afford her some form of privacy. Aegnor and his brother would lay in the open under the stars, as was their way. Angrod had already made a small pallet from a blanket and a riding cloak to lay upon and was leaning back against his saddle as he rummaged through his pack for a piece of dried meat and some bread. Aegnor had noticed that the tent seemed empty and glanced around for the third of their party. He found her a short distance away walking in the tall grass. Every so often she would stop and stoop down to inspect something before continuing on. She had remained silent throughout most of their travel and Aegnor wondered if she were perhaps somewhat forlorn at leaving her aunt.

"She is a quiet one," Angrod remarked when he saw where his brother's attention was.

"I imagine leaving one's home after some many years could give one many things to think about," Aegnor responded.

"Hmm, I suppose, or perhaps she is just shy," his brother mused, "still, we should not allow her to wander too far and we should also see if she needs to eat …"

Aegnor looked at his brother and noticed how he made no move to get up.

"And by 'we' you mean 'me' I take it?"

"Oh, well, you are already up," Angrod blinked innocently, "and I was going to look for some wine in the packs so …"

"Lazy little orc." Aegnor snapped playfully as he tossed left over piece of fruit he had in his hands at his brother and then turning to beat a hasty retreat.

"Orc?! Fa!" his brother called, angrily picking out the small chunks of food from his hair.

Aegnor looked around and found the sitting girl a few feet from the line of trees that would open to a trail that he knew would lead to Tarn Aeluín. She was busy with something in her hands and Aegnor hesitated to disturb her.

Aegnor was fascinated with how much she had changed from when he had last laid eyes on her. While she was still small it was easy to see that womanhood was upon her, her body filling out to form all of the soft curves and lines that his brother and cousins had always been so keen on observing when they were younger. Her hair was dark and hung long and loose and well past her waist. She was practically sitting in it and Aegnor was of a mind to sweep it up, finding it a crime that something so lovely should be allowed to lie in the dirt to become tangled with leaves and twigs. He thought it created a pleasant contrast against the fairness of her skin.
Aegnor frowned. What kind of buffoon stands in the shadows of the oncoming dark staring at the fairness of a young woman's skin? He was suddenly very grateful that Angrod was not with him at the moment. With a small shake of his head he chided himself for his lack of focus and softly cleared his throat.

The dark head before him turned to reveal two bright eyes and Aegnor found himself distracted once again. Her eyes had always been a source of fascination to him. One could have considered them blue or grey, but not some unremarkable grey like a piece of rock or stone. They were the grey of the last ashes of a fire or the grey of the ocean the instant before the dawn touches the water, hinting at little flecks of light within that resemble burnt umber and pale green. It seemed as if they pulled at him. Given the chance, he was not sure if he could ever tire of looking at them.

But that would remain to be seen for they were quickly cast down and hidden by dark lashes as the young lady pulled herself up from the ground.

"My lord," she greeted politely with a deep curtsy.

"My lady," he responded with a small bow and amused smile. Such propriety. "Forgive me my lady, I do not mean to disturb you. I just wanted to see if you were in need of anything? Something to eat perhaps?"

"No my lord," she said, eyes still downcast, "I thank you for your concern but it is not necessary. I am well." She curtsied once more and then turned and sat back down upon the ground.

Aegnor hesitated a moment, wondering if he should request that she move somewhere closer to the encampment when he became curious about what was in her hands.

"May I ask what you are making?"

"Oh," she glanced up surprised and quickly looked down again, "it is nothing really my lord, just a childhood fancy. Something to remind me of ... well, just something to remind me."

One did not require the keen hearing of the elder to hear the tinge of sadness in her voice. Even though she was returning to the place of her birth, it was not her home.

Aegnor stepped around and knelt down in front of her and watched nimble fingers delicately weave an assortment of flowers into what appeared to be a wreath.

"That is lovely. Did the lady Adanel show you how to make it?"

"Yes my lord," she said without looking up, "although it is something that is not made till festival and is worn by the wise women of our people. It is a tradition really. You see the flowers are not selected simply be random, there is a reason these specific flowers are chosen. There is purpose that goes back --"

She stopped suddenly and looked up at Aegnor, as if surprised by her own outburst, and then looked down once more.

"Forgive me," she laughed softly and shook her head, "I forget myself sometimes."

"No, please, continue. I would like to hear."

"Truly, you do not have to --"

"My lady, please," he sat completely upon the ground, his legs crisscrossed beneath him, "I would
very much like to hear."

She looked up at him and he felt that strange tug once more. No, her eyes were not merely blue or grey, they were a sea. And one day, some poor unfortunate boy would drown in their depths. Aegnor pitied whoever the fortunate young man would be.

She considered him for only a moment before she looked back down and resumed her work.

"Very well my lord. Every year my people celebrate the coming of spring with a festival. It signifies the coming of summer and rebirth and every festival the wise women of all of the neighboring clans will come together and bless the unions of all couples who seek it. It is also during this festival, one wise woman is selected and crowned to be the voice for all women in council and will carry this tradition on throughout the year till the next year's festival. It is a great honor to be chosen of course and after the selection everyone will continue to celebrate till the feast and then return to their homes."

"Yes," said Aegnor, "I know of this festival. Your people have observed this for many years. I regret that I have not attended one although Finrod wishes us to go."

"And you would be welcome," she said with a smile as she selected another flower and began to deftly weave it in with the others. "But what many do not know is that the festival is not meant to commemorate rebirth but to memorialize death."

Aegnor looked up from her hands to her face but Andreth's focus remained on her work.

"You see, long ago, long before your people came here, long before even light had come to the land, the Enemy was here. Men, women and children were snatched up in the dark and tribes were attacked and their seemed to be no reprieve from the darkness. Till one day, men of shadow came down from the mountain that claimed to speak for the great lords that lived there and promised wealth and protection to those who pay honor to them. And the tribes agreed because the race of Man was young then and easily fooled. And so each year they would come down from the mountains to take their … offering. The price to be paid for their protection was that each village would select a daughter as a bride to the mountain. In the beginning it was considered a great honor because only the most beautiful maidens were chosen to go and were told they would live in a great castle in comfort. And so, a festival was held and a maid chosen, adorned in white and with a crown of flowers and carried off with great fanfare, only to be never seen nor heard from again.

It was only a matter of time for some of the more wise to open their eyes in the dark and see and many villages began to refuse to give a maiden to their lords. Fathers and mothers began hiding their daughters but to no avail. A deal had been struck and if the dark lords did not receive their due then entire villages paid the price.

It was the women of the villages came together and devised their own plan, they found a way to refuse. They could not give the girl a weapon for it would be found and the village and everyone in it punished. It had to be subtle, something that would not be noticed. The festivals would still be held and a maiden chosen and crowned with flowers," she held up the wreath between them as she spoke, pointing out the various blooms.

"Morning glory, Nightshade, Oleander, Blood root, Fox glove, Belladonna. All beautiful. All poisonous. The maiden would then climb upon her horse or carriage and during her travel to the mountains, she would eat bits and pieces. By the time she would reach her destination, the crown had done its work and denied the beasts of their prize."

Aegnor looked at her as she admired her work.
"I did not know that the source of your festival was from such dark times. I have never heard this before."

Andreth laughed as she set the wreath back onto her lap and selected another flower.

"No I suppose you would not, for the men do not talk of it. It is the women who mark and remember such things, tales that are told down from one generation to the next, acknowledging their sacrifice."

"Grim tales."

"But not forever," she reassured as she wove. "Eventually the light came into the land and the Enemy was thrust into the shadows. It was so once and will be again. Evil things cannot tolerate the light."

"You are young to be so wise," Aegnor smiled.

"I am not sure if I would call it wisdom as much as hope, although a small hope."

Aegnor watched her work for a moment before speaking.

"My lady, I apologize but I feel that we should back closer to the camp …"

"No, no, I understand," she sighed as she looked to the horizon, "it will be dark soon. Pity. I was hoping to see the Aeluin."

"Oh? You wish to see it?" he asked as he offered his hand and helped her up.

"Oh yes," she said, "very much. I have been told and read so much about it. It is said to be hallowed ground and the waters a pure blue and clear as glass but can reflect like mirrors."

Aegnor smiled at her eagerness but could not help but notice that she still kept her eyes downcast as she spoke. He wondered what had happened to the bold little girl who met his stare unflinching.

"Perhaps I could take you, but not now. We must return or my brother will fret like the iaurbinn he is."

"Is he very old?"

Aegnor blinked and looked over at her as they walked.

"You speak Sindarin?"

"Of course. It would be foolish not to. How else is one to learn of others if they cannot speak their tongue?"

Aegnor smiled and spoke in Sindarin.

"And what would you wish to learn of us?"

"Much my lord," she answered fluently, "too much for you to be bothered with."

Aegnor laughed and shook his head.

"Ask," he said, "it is no bother. Please."
"Well," she paused for a moment as she glanced hesitantly up at him, "your people were awoken yes? How were they awoken? And by whom? Was it your god? And do you even have a god? And how did your grandfather become king? There are several different races of the elder yes? Do each have a king? And does one king supersede the other? And how is that decided? And how do your people keep record of your history? Is it done orally or do you have scribes? And it is possible to see these records of so? Also –"

Aegnor's eyes never left her face as she spoke.

Aegnor tapped his fingers impatiently on the rim of his cup before him. It was typical of Carnistir to be late. It was also typical of Aegnor to be irritated. Cafe employees bustled about their morning set up around him. Carnistir must have known the manager because the man behind the bar had allowed him to enter and take a seat as if he were expecting him. A small table had been set up with two chairs and refreshments were soon laid out. It was a nice place, tucked back into the alley, away from the main thoroughfare. Perhaps he could take Andrea here.

Andrea. She was so like her. And last night! Last night she remembered. Memories came to her. And for a brief moment she was there, Andreth. It was surprising just how quickly it had all happened.

Although not nearly as surprising as when she had kissed him. Which was something Andreth would never do.

But then she was not Andreth ... was she.

The roar of a motorcycle engine pulled Aegnor from his thoughts. He looked up from the coffee he had been absently stirring to see his cousin park in front of the café where he waited.

"How typical," he thought caustically, "how cliché."

Aegnor silently chided himself for being so acerbic. After all, Carnistir was here to help him, was he not? Of course, given the nature of his cousin that could be up for debate. Still, it could be argued that there was a hint of a smirk when Carnistir walked in. Clad in a leather jacket with a white t-shirt beneath, jeans and work boots that were loose and unlaced, he was the picture of disinterested anarchy.

He sat down across from Aegnor and smiled as he leaned back in his chair. The waiter came forward with an expresso ready and Carnistir thanked him as he dropped a large bill and told him to keep the change. Subtlety was never one of his strong points.

"So you have found her eh? Your little mortal girl? That is her is it not?"

Aegnor's eyes widened in spite of himself. Carnistir spoke in Quenya. Some things never change. Aegnor took a deep breath, focused on calm, and answered in Quenya right back.

"Why yes Carnistir, it is a surprise to see you as well, after all this time. I had no idea you had left the Halls either. The Valar be praised you are alive and well and that we were so fortunate to find each other."

"Oh please," Carnistir sniffed, "do not go into the long lost cousin routine. We have never liked
each other and there is no reason to pretend that we do now. As for praising the Valar, well, let us just avoid that topic shall we? My hypocrisy only goes so far."

"Your hypocrisy only goes so far? It knows no limits!" Aegnor snapped. "Much like you. You bonded with her? This mortal girl? Did you tell her Carnistir? Does she truly know what you have done?"

"Do not dare sit there and try to pass judgment on me lest you turn that self-righteousness on yourself. My choices are exactly that, mine! Much like how your lack of choice are yours."

"Oh yes, and you have made so many wise choices in the past that to question this would be ludicrous!"

"Enough!" Carnistir hissed, slamming his hand down on the table causing the few employees within to glance their way. Aegnor however never moved. Carnistir took a deep breath and regained some semblance of control.

"I did not come here to tear open old wounds. Whether you wish to believe me or not, I can help. I leave it to you."

Aegnor's eyes narrowed as he scrutinized his cousin. The Carnistir he knew would have thrown the table across the room in a rage shouting. Aegnor had prepared himself for that. He had expected that. But he did not expect this. Instead of the reactions that Aegnor remembered so vividly, Carnistir had calmed himself, dropping his voice and speaking with what seemed to be sincerity. Aegnor had been so prepared to believe that his cousin had not changed at all that it never occurred to him that, after all the ages, perhaps Carnistir had and instead it was he who had not changed. It was a disconcerting thought.

"You should not have entered my mind uninvited last night," he said. He cringed internally at his petulance. If Carnistir noticed he gave no sign.

"Forgive me. That was wrong. Now, I will ask again. Is it her?"

"I do not know. I cannot say for certain."

"But you believe there is a chance."

"Perhaps. But it could just be a child's dream, or a fool holding on to the past."

Carnistir smirked at the obvious connotation and the obscure apology. "Well, never let it be said that I would not agree with you being a fool," Carnistir said dryly, "but as for the dreams, even a child's dream could be significant. Does she have them?"

"What?"

"Dreams, does she have any. Does she talk in her sleep? Speak of strange memories or recollections of things she could not know."

"I do not know what she says in her sleep."

Carnistir rolled his eyes.

"I take it from your tone that you have not been intimate in any way then. Really Aegnor, am I going to have to sit down with you and have 'the talk'? What about dreams? Has she said anything
"She has made mention of a dream yes," he responded, ignoring Carnistir's dig. "But it was vague."

"But still a memory …"

"Yes," he said reluctantly, "I believe it is. She said that she has had them since she was a child and … I was in them."

"She told you this?"

"Not exactly …"

"Then how do you know?"

Aegnor grimaced, his mouth becoming a thin tight line. He did not wish to admit how he knew.

"I … saw it," he admitted with a resigned sigh, "in her mind."

Carnistir blinked in genuine surprise, staring at Aegnor for only a moment before he barked out a laugh.

"Why Aegnor," he exclaimed with mock indignation, "you entered her mind uninvited?!!"

Aegnor could feel his face start to burn with embarrassment. He supposed he deserved it. "I did no such thing," he huffed. "Her thoughts are strong at times. They come through sporadically." Like when he walked in on her in his bedroom and she thought … well … now was not the time to think about what she had thought. Carnistir brought his laughter down to a low chuckle as he wiped at his eyes. Aegnor thought he was being a little over dramatic.

"Ah, I see. And ah, what did you … see?"

Aegnor pursed his lips in disapproval at what Carnistir was trying to imply. He would not be bated.

"She dreamed of our time at Tarn Aeluin … and of my death."

Carnistir had stopped laughing now and looked at Aegnor in all seriousness. "What else," he asked.

"She will say things, things that, in passing, casually. Things that Andreth had said before to me. Snippets of conversations. At first I thought it was simply a coincidence, that this was just a girl who resembled someone from long ago. But they began to happen so frequently. I thought perhaps I was simply projecting something on her that I wished with all of my heart. But when she spoke of the dreams, dreams she had had since childhood, and when she saw the artifacts, a collection of items I had collected that dated back to the first age, she recognized them! She knew what they were! She did not say as much out loud but she knew. I am certain of it. Or at least I think that I am for I do not know how much of this is real or just my desperation at wanting her to be who I want her to be. Andreth is gone. Dead. Her spirit passed on to wherever it is that spirits of Men go. It cannot be her! And yet …"

Aegnor collapsed against the back of his chair. He felt drained from the emotions of his confession. It was a weight that should have been lifted and yet for some reason now felt even heavier than before. Carnsitir leaned back in his chair as well, studying Aegnor.

"Curious that the link is so strong considering you never bound yourself to her, to Andreth. Especially after all this time. Your love for her and hers for you must have been strong indeed. I
wonder how many times you have crossed the other's path without knowing."

"What are you talking about?"

Carnistir looked at Aegnor as if he were an idiot. "You have heard of reincarnation, yes?"

"Reincarnation?"

"Metempsychosis, transmigration, past lives, reincarnation," Carnistir said impatiently, "it is a quite common theme in many religions. Do I really have to give you a lesson?"

"I know what reincarnation is," Aegnor said through gritted teeth, "what does it have to do with me."

"It has nothing to do with you, well, not entirely anyway, but it has everything to do with her." Carnistir leaned forward. "She is your Andreth and yet not. She is a modern woman of this century of course, born in this century, growing and maturing in this century. But within her, deep inside her very being, her very core, lies the memories, life and soul of your Andreth."

"You are saying that within Andrea are Andreth's memories," Aegnor said skeptically. "That she can remember things that happened ages ago, but not to her."

"No you git … well, maybe. She is sort of a …vessel if you will. She is Andreth and yet she is also …what did you call her?"

"Andrea."

"Yes Andrea. Ha! Even the names are similar. There are many different theories on the matter of course. Philosophical and religious beliefs regarding the existence or non-existence of an unchanging 'self' have a direct bearing on how reincarnation is viewed within a given tradition. Some holding that there was no existence and that the self is annihilated upon death. Others believed in a form of cyclic existence, where a being is born, lives, dies and then is reborn, but in the context of a type of determinism or fatalism in which karma played no role. Some postulate an eternally existent self or soul that survives death and reincarnates as another living being, based on karmic inheritance. But the Buddhist concept of reincarnation differs from others in that there is no eternal soul, spirit or self but only a stream of consciousness that links life with life. Literally becoming again, or rebirth or re-becoming. A fixed entity that is reborn."

As Carnistir spoke, his voice became more and more pitched and his eyes locked on to Aegnor and burned with intensity. Aegnor shook his head.

"You speak of myth and fantasy Carnistir."

"WE are myth and fantasy and yet here we are. Our kind is nothing more than stories and fairie tales. So I think it would be wise not to dismiss myth so readily," Carnistir sniffed, "Not all Men's souls are relegated to one life and one death. It is not so difficult to believe that a creative and powerful spirit who was inhibited in certain endeavors in her earthly life would find a way to express that creativity several ages later, in another body. It has been done, and done often."

"You know this to be true? You have proof?"

"Of course I do," Carnistir said imperiously, "I live it, have lived it for ages now."
Carnistir sat back in his chair and sipped at his drink, eyes watching Aegnor over the rim of his cup. Aegnor waited patiently, refusing to be baited by his cousin's theatrics. But then Carnistir surprised Aegnor yet again by looking away suddenly, going inward to some memory and when he spoke, his voice taking on a gentle whimsical quality that went against everything Aegnor knew of Carnistir's character.

"You were already gone when I met her. I forget that, that you were gone. So many gone, they tend to run together and I cannot differentiate anymore. So much death. It was what I expected to find, when word came to me at Himlad. Word that orcs and Enemy filth dared tread foot in Thargelion, attacking the small tribes of Men that populated the lands around the rivers. I had never given them much thought, they were only squatters really, at least as far as I was concerned. Unimportant in the grand scheme of things. I was so wrong."

Carnistir chuckled and shook his head at the memory before turning his gaze once more to Aegnor.

"I had gone there fully expecting to find every life from that little band of trespassers taken. I fully expected to find nothing but death. But when I got there, when I finally got there, I did not find the ground littered with the bodies of slain men and feasting orcs. Instead I found a tribe of warriors braced for a doomed last stand, prepared to fight to their last breath. Valiant and unafraid and lead by a fierce warrior queen."

Aegnor noticed how the light in Carnistir's eyes seem to brighten as he spoke.

"She stood on the ramparts covered in the blood and gore of her enemies and surrounded by fire. She stood fearless above the fray and shouted her defiance to the wind. She was bold and fearless, terrifying and powerful. She was beautiful. She was also infuriatingly stubborn and strong-willed, refusing to bend in any way other than that which she wanted to go. Pig headed woman. I believe I fell in love with her the moment I saw her."

"And so you bound yourself to her."

"I gave myself willing, readily to her and she to me. I have no regrets save one. Had I not done what I had done then I would not have been able to find her again. At least not as easily."

Aegnor had been about to ask him what his one regret was when what Carnistir had said after caught his attention.

"What do you mean find her again?"

"Hayley, the woman you saw last night. She is Haleth reborn."

The look on Aegnor's face must have been quite the show for Carnistir threw his head back and laughed at his cousin once again.

"By the void your face!" he laughed. "It does not take much does it?"

"How do you know this? How do you know this is true?"

"Because we are bound you git! We share a bond that cannot be sundered, not even in death. She has been reborn several times since my return. As a queen, a warrior, a spy, freedom fighter, or a soldier. Always she is reborn and always I find her. She pulls at me, consumes me, we are drawn to each other with the need to fill the space the other has left. And when one has found the other it is as if the world has finally come on line and life has fallen in place. Of course, that has not always been the case," Carnistir smiled, "she almost had me beheaded once."
"So that is it. You just show up and she remembers."

"Don't be so daft. Of course it is not that easy. These things do require some finesse."

"But how can you be so sure?"

"I suppose it is easier for me that it would be for you. The bond between Haleth and I never fails."

"But I am not bound to Andreth."

"No you were not. But your love must have been true, strong enough to pull at the two of you to bring you together perhaps. It is not just a coincidence that you found this girl, out of millions of girls, this girl who looks just like your Andreth. Has the same memories as your Andreth. Who dreams about you as Andreth. Why do you still resist? You have found her Aikanáro! Why do you deny it?"

"I do not know what I have found!" Aegnor shouted in frustration and then collapsed back into his seat. "I do not know." The hopelessness in his voice sounded bitter to his ears.

"It is hard at first, I know. The pain of memory and sorrow of the past is difficult to navigate. But this is no random act. There is a reason why you have finally found each other. Who knows how many times you have passed each other in the night. Do not let this chance slip through your fingers for who knows when the opportunity will come again."

"And what do you do when they … are gone? What then?"

"I wait."

Perhaps it was the tone of his cousin's own voice or perhaps it was the forlorn way Carnistir looked at him, but Aegnor was suddenly reminded of something he wished to ask.

"Earlier, as you spoke, you said that you had only one regret. What was it?"

It was Carnistir's turn to be surprised and Aegnor could not help but be struck by the sadness that had overcome his cousin's eyes.

"That I was not there when Haleth died."

Carnistir shook his head, his laughter now bitter.

"It was foolish really. Stubborn woman, could not see. She thought I sought to control her. To rule her. And she was right of course. As if she would ever be ruled. I knew this and still I tried. And she left. She took her people, faithful to a fault and left. And I let her go."

"Why?"

"Because one cannot control fire, only put it out. And I could never do such a thing to her. I should have followed. I should have stopped her. But I did not. It was pride that drove her off and cowardice that kept me away! I should have been with her at the end," Carnistir spat bitterly, "I should have been there."

"It is natural to try and avoid pain."

"You would say that," he snarled, "you who avoided what could have been the greatest moments of your existence but instead chose self-preservation to avoid pain!"
"You have no idea what I chose," Aegnor hissed back. "I did what was right for her at the time, what was right for both of us. It was a time of war and one cannot take a bride! I had a duty to fulfill! To my family, to our people –"

"Oh yes and just look what your precious devotion to family and duty got you then! At fiery death and countless ages in wandering the Halls! So tell me what is it getting you now Aikanáro? All that high-minded duty and honor?! Not so magnanimous now are you! Even now, when faced with a second chance to know what it is to have true purpose, you are actually trying to make the same mistakes all over again! Pathetic. I for one will not feel guilt over the choices I have made, I promise you that!"

"You have never felt guilt over choices you have made! None of you family ever has! And I am well versed in just how devoted you are in keeping your promises!"

Carnistir stood up, slamming his fists down on the table once more and Aegnor rose just as quickly to meet him. The café had gone quiet during their altercation, the space being so small it was kind of hard to miss. Aegnor thought they must have looked quite frightening.

"I came here to help but I can see now that you do not need it. Therefore I will not waste my time any longer. Good luck with your endeavors, whatever they may be."

And with that, Aegnor watched Carnistir, his cousin, the only other elder he had come in contact with in countless years, turned and left.
Chapter 11

His skin was burning. The ground that he lay upon was scorched from the searing heat that was all around. The reeking smell of burning flesh filled his senses and he knew it was his as the flames danced higher and higher. It was suffocating and every ragged, agonizing breath he still took wracked his body with pain.

He was dying.

Somehow he turned his head only to see his brother, eyes glazed over, his fëa having already fled the horror that was all around. Dust and death were his only company now. His breathing was labored and wet. He was bleeding out. The darkness would feast well tonight. Movement in his peripheral pulled his attention and he turned his gaze upwards and away as the beast Undolaurë prepared to finish what he had begun.

He supposed it was fitting that it would end like this.

As the smell of sulfur filled the air, he closed his eyes as he always did when he wanted to see her. Dark hair framing her face, grey eyes that could take on hues of green and blue depending on mood or whim, pale skin and graceful neck that he had desperately desired to press his face against, becoming lost in the embrace he had long denied himself out of duty.

Yes, he supposed it was quite fitting that it should end like this.

The pain was blinding as the flames engulfed his body.

Andrea awoke with a gasp, eyes wide. She lay there for a moment as she calmed her mind and confirming that she was indeed not on fire but safe in her room, covered in sweat and clutching the sheets of her bed that twisted around her. She brought a hand to her chest and could feel her heart pounding. Her other hand went to her head and she raked her fingers through her hair, pulling away the sweat soaked strands that were stuck to her face.

What the fuck.

She slowly turned and rose up from her bed. A quick glance at her alarm clock told her the time was 4:00am.

Ugh.

She shuffled to the door and then to the bathroom to relieve herself. She flicked on the light and looked at the reflection in the mirror that squinted back at her.

Yeesh.

After her business was done she went to the kitchen, poured a glass of milk and plopped down at the kitchen counter. She would not be able to go back to sleep for a bit after that one. They had been getting worse lately. Far more vivid than they had had been in quite some time. This one especially. But what she really hated about them was how it was always Agner who was in them. She supposed it made sense on some subconscious level. They had been spending more time together, meeting for lunch or dinner or lunch and dinner. They would spend hours sitting in the little patio garden area he had on top of his apartment discussing the various artifacts in his collection or what the topic of her lecture had been that afternoon. He used to stop by to listen to
her lectures but Andrea had to put a stop to that. Not that she did not like when he would come to
the campus to see her, but she found that he was too much of a distraction when he came into the
class. And not just for her but for her students as well, male and female.

She could not blame them though, it was difficult not to notice him. Tall, blonde, and perfect to the
point one would think he was photoshopped. When class was done many of the female students
would linger or walk out slowly, casting blatantly appraising looks his way. But if he ever noticed
he never showed it. He would simply wait till the room was clear and then make his way over to
her podium, his eyes never leaving her the entire time. It would be a lie if she said she did not love
every minute of it.

The creak of door opening pulled her from her reverie and she looked up expecting to see her
roommate emerging from the hallway. But instead of Kate she saw Gabe, Kate's faux boyfriend
entering the kitchen, pants loosely fastened around his waist, face illuminated from the faint glow
of his phone.

_Who the hell is he texting at 4am?_

Glanced up at Andrea with a nod of his head.

"S'up," he mumbled.

Andrea took a gulp of her milk.

He either did not notice or did not care about the look of not so subtle annoyance at his presence
from Andrea. Turning back to his phone he walked over to the fridge and, to Andrea's
consternation, grabbed the milk and took a swig straight from the carton. She felt her teeth grind.

"We have glasses," she said rather flatly.

"Nah I'm good," he answered still clueless, "just wanted a little."

Andrea ground her teeth some more as he turned around and leaned against the counter, looking
back at his phone.

"Can't sleep?"

"Now what makes you think that?" she replied sweetly.

"Dunno," he shrugged, still oblivious, "because you're up."

Andrea was about to marvel at his keen power of observation but decided against it.

"Any luck with that guy you're seeing?"

Andrea looked at him for a moment wondering what could possibly be bringing on this sudden
need for him to converse. She could not help but think that Kate had something do with it and
wondered what else she may have told him.

"Yeah fine. We're fine. Everything is fine … I guess."

Gabe glanced up at her from his phone.

"I mean, as much as it can be, you know how these things are, in the beginning. It's just, you know
kind of going and … we'll see what … you know …" Andrea trailed off. What the hell was she
saying?
Gabe on the other hand had returned to his phone.

"Huh, no I don't know. You either are or you aren't," he glanced back up at her again from his phone and if it were not for the dim lighting, she could have sworn she saw the hint of a smile on his face. "Do you know?"

Andrea stared at him for a moment but before she could even think of an answer he had already turned and headed down the hallway.

_Asshole_, she hissed in her mind. She did not think it was possible to dislike him as much as she already did but somehow she managed it. But not because he had been rude or said something inappropriate, but because he was right.

She didn't know. She had no idea.

They had been spending time together of course and it has been wonderful. And it seemed to Andrea as if he enjoyed the time spent together as much as she did. He never skipped out on plans or was late. He was always insisting on picking up the tab, holding doors, taking her hand and wrapping it around his arm. He was attentive in a way Andrea had never experienced in a person before. He would listen to her every word, notice her every action, he would stare at her to the point that she would hide behind her hair to hide the blush she could feel burning at her cheeks.

But other than flirtatious looks and chivalrous behavior there was nothing else to report. Nothing. The last and only time they had kissed being the time she had lunged at him in the hallway and then beat a hasty retreat into her apartment. She had to admit she had surprised even herself with that little display. Not that she regretted it. It had been quite exciting with even the rushed urgency of it. He had not resisted or pulled away at all. In fact, even though he had not expected it, he had been a very willing participant. When she had pressed her lips against his, there had perhaps been a moment’s hesitation on his part. But when he did not pull back she became even braver and kissed him a little deeper, pressing herself against him. It was not till she felt his hands move to the small of her back that she pulled back and away. It was perhaps a bit of a pricktease-ish move but she knew if she continued she would not be able to stop and she did not want to go there with him, not yet. It had been a long time since she had been with anyone intimately … a very long time. She did not wish to repeat past mistakes. And so, after making the first move, after making her interest known, she decided to step back and allow him to take the initiative.

But now a week has gone by and he still has not done anything. Not one thing. And it was not like Andrea was not giving him plenty of opportunity. She would meet his gaze head on, silently screaming for him to kiss her only to have him turn away. She would lean in close when they would look at something, or hug him good night with her head against his chest looking up at him. But all he would do is cup her face in his hand, place a lingering kiss on her forehead and then withdraw. It was all becoming quite frustrating to Andrea and she said as much to Kate the next morning.

"And you're sure he's not gay?"

Andrea sat slumped over her coffee, her head leaning into one hand as she struggled to wake fully. By the time she had managed to fall back asleep it was time for her to get up and so now she sat in what felt like a semi-catatonic state as she nursed her cup of liquid caffeine.

She sighed upon hearing Kate's question. It was the third time she had asked.

"He's not gay."
"Don't get pissy," Kate protested, "he's beautiful, a great dresser, and has impeccable hygiene, I mean seriously. It's a valid question."

Andrea yawned while simultaneously stretching her arms above her head. "He's not gay," she repeated.

"Asexual?"

"No."

"A virgin?"

Andrea opened her mouth to speak and paused for the briefest of seconds. Is he a virgin? She shook her head at the thought.

"No, at least I don't think so."

"What do you mean, you don't think so?"

"I mean, it's not like it has come up in conversation Kate. 'Oh this restaurant is lovely, by the way, how many women have you slept with, if any?'"

Kate shrugged. "Maybe he went all Duggar clan and took some vow of celibacy till marriage, you don't know."

"I really don't think that is it."

"Well then," Kate said as she sat down across from Andrea at the table, "it is one of two things then. Either he is just not into you or you have been friend-zoned."

Andrea thought that for a moment. It could not be that he was not into her. She had asked him. He had said he was. He had said that he was perhaps too much, whatever that means. What did that mean? He had also said that he did not want her to get hurt. Andrea had taken that to mean that he had a previous relationship that ended badly and did not want to rebound with her. But maybe she had taken his meaning all wrong. Maybe he was only interested in friendship. After all, she had given him plenty of opportunity had she not? What if he thought her waiting for him to act was her own lack of interest? No, no, no calm down, you are over thinking this. Just. Calm. Down.

As Andrea sat there, her thoughts racing through her head, hers eyes became wider and wider and her hands came up slowly to cover her mouth as she rested her elbows on the table.

"Look," Kate said, picking up on her friends inner turmoil, "don't freak out, I am sure he likes you. Every time you call him he comes running. Maybe the two of you just need a change of scenery you know? Somewhere where it's just the two of you, away from the city?"

"Like where?" Andrea's voice sounded muffled from behind her hands.

"Well, what about that place you always go to at the beginning of the school year, that camping place, you know, Cow Lake —"

"– Moose Pond –"

"– whatever, just take him there with you. You and him, by a lake, in a tent in the middle of nowhere, peeing in the woods. Get him out of his element and maybe the two of you can, you know …" Kate's expression became more mischievous as she spoke, getting her message across as
But something about what Kate had said had piqued Andrea's interest. She was planning on going. She went every year, just before the weather dropped and the snow came in. It was almost a days drive to get up there from the city but her family had a cabin and she would stay the first night there and then hike the trail to "her favorite spot where she would set up her tent on the rock face near the water. They might even be able to take the horses out if they were lucky. She loved this … but would he?

"What if he says no?"

Kate looked at her as if she had not considered that outcome.

"Then fuck him. I'll go with you!"

This caused Andrea to bust out laughing as anyone who knew Kate knew that she hated camping.

"The last time you said you wanted to go camping we ended up at a Ritz-Carlton and ended up scrambling for rent."

"Uh it was a mountainside resort, not a Ritz-Carlton and I seem to remember some of the cabins had outdoor bathrooms which is pretty outdoorsy. But not this time, oh no," Kate exclaimed as she jumped up and ran over to throw herself down on Andrea's lap, "this time we will sleep in a tent and kill what we eat and have our own romantic little getaway and get naked and bath in water that animals pee in!" she declared as she tried to kiss Andrea while Andrea struggled to push her away while laughing.

"Sweet, can I watch?"

The girls stopped their horseplay to see Gabe standing at the fridge, carton of milk in hand. Andrea felt her teeth grind.

"Hey bae," Kate said as she hopped up and went over to give him a kiss, "we were just talking about going camping. I told Andrea I would go with her if Agner didn't."

Kate rested her chin on Gabe's shoulder but his attention was already back on his phone.

"Hope he likes being outside more than you do," he mumbled as he went back down the hall to Kate's room. Kate turned and looked at Andrea.

"Oh my God, does he?"

"You know," Andrea said thoughtfully, "he must have mentioned it before because I am pretty sure he does."

Andrea watched as Agner reached across the table to pour more wine in his glass. She had come over for dinner and could not help but be impressed with the spread he had laid out. Seared mahi with some sort of butter sauce with basil and vegetables and fresh made bread with olive oil. Andrea had not been impressed as much as amazed to see that he had prepared everything himself, even the bread. When she asked him where he learned to cook he just shrugged and said that it was
something the men in his family had done for as long as he could remember. Andrea could not help but feel that all of her feeble attempts at disguising take out as homemade had been seen through.

They sat now on the rooftop patio, drinking some strange wine that Agner had said was very old and rare. It had a strange but pleasant taste, somehow managing to be both sweet and dry at the same time. Andrea fought the urge to drink it like water. Especially when they began one of their discussions. If she drank too much wine she would become easily distracted by his eyes or the familiar way he would look at her at times. She liked to be focused for their little debates, it was the one time she felt she was on equal footing.

"You go down a perilous path when you start judging historical figures by modern standards," he said taking a sip from his glass, "there is a bigger picture that must be appreciated. A way of life then, although repugnant now, would hardly be an outlier in society at that time."

"But the dark side of these "great" men must be exposed, must be told, in order for history to be true," she interjected. "If you allow certain details to be cherry picked while others are disregarded is simply unjust. Is it right to celebrate a man who while a great statesman was still a bigot?"

"History is complicated and so are they people who make it. The truth of the matter is that great people sometimes do terrible things, and terrible people sometimes do great things. To simply erase every person in history who we find abhorrent along with everything they accomplished is to deny the very contradictions that is humanity. That is where the knowledge lay."

"I suppose you are right about that," Andrea relented. "Students today have never known a time when they can't choose their own media, truth or history. Everything is either all good or all bad and the only reality that they hear is the one that reaffirms their own preconceptions I suppose."

Andrea sighed and leaned back in her chair. "The test of a first rate intelligence is the ability to hold two opposing ideas in the mind at the same time and still retain the ability to function."

"F. Scott Fitzgerald."

"I was going to say my dad but," Andrea grinned, "I suppose Fitzgerald said it first."

"He did."

"I guess you would know."

"I would."

Andrea laughed. "Are you ever wrong?"

Agner smiled ruefully. "Only when it counts."

"So you admit you can make mistakes?"

"Oh yes," he answered, "I have most certainly made mistakes."

"Oh really, do tell."

Agner stared at her for what felt like to Andrea was an eternity before he spoke.

"Not tonight."

Andrea decided to change the subject.
“Hey so,” she said getting up and moving over so that she sat next to Agner facing him, "I was wondering something. Um, every year I go upstate to this spot, in the Adirondacks, it's a lake, well a pond, it's called Moose Pond, but it could be a lake, anyway I go camping up there. It's a day's drive from the city, near this little town called Bloomindale up I-87, anyway, we have a cabin and there are trails that take you to the water, that's where I take a tent and camp, by the water, anyway I was going to go up there and camp, like I said and I was, uh wondering if, um you might want to or like to go … with … me … I also ride horses."

*I'm an idiot.*

Agner looked at her yet again and Andrea found herself getting caught up in the strange swirl of lights that seem to come from his eyes. This time it truly was an eternity. He was taking too long to answer. Andrea wished she had never opened her mouth.

"You know what? Don't worry about it," she said in an attempt to sound casual. "It's not a big deal and you probably have stuff to do and stuff to … do so, just, you know don't worry about it. Kate was thinking about coming anyway." She jumped up from the sofa and made for the ladder that went back to the apartment window. "It's late so I should –"

Andrea stopped, or was stopped mid step as Agner took her hand and turned her around. She had not even heard him get up.

"Andrea, if you would stop for just a moment, I am trying to tell you that I would very much like to go."

Andrea blinked.

"Oh? OH! Okay! That's great. Okay. You'll go! It'll be great."

*I am the biggest idiot.*

"Before you go, I have something for you but it is inside."

"Oh?"

They made their way down the ladder and through the window to Agner's room. Once they were inside Agner went over to the side table next to the bed and pulled out something wrapped in a cloth.

"I do not know why I made this."

Andrea took the item from Agner's hand a removed the cloth.

"I am afraid my skills are a bit out of practice. It has been a long time since I have done this, but the florist assured me the flowers were of the same kind. I am almost certain it is accurate."

Andrea looked down at her hands. Within them were flowers that were woven into a wreath much like the dried one in the case. Andrea's fingers moved gently over the tiny delicate blooms.

"Morning glory, Nightshade, Oleander, Blood root, Fox Glove, Belladonna," she whispered, "all beautiful. All poisonous."

Something was shifting again, and she felt almost as if she were back in some sort of dream state as her hand almost involuntarily moved to place the wreath atop her head. Her mind felt heavy and her eyes moved to find his and it seemed as if they were in a dream. And for a moment she thought
perhaps she was back in one of her dreams because when she found his eyes she saw pain.

He reached for her slowly, a hand that caressed her cheek and then gently run through her hair to cup the back of her head. She did not resist as he pulled her closer, their lips barely touching. Andrea looked into his eyes and if her world was unsteady before it was a lost in a raging sea now. She could not think. A hand moved across her back as hers went up and around his neck. She realized that he was shaking as his lips came down on hers.

This was not the rushed hit and run of their first kiss in the hallway. This was slow and hesitant, it was gentle and soft and exploratory. But soon trembling hands began to tighten their grip around her waist and Andrea felt a dizzying tide of warmth come over her as the kiss swiftly intensified. Insistent mouths parted lips and bodies pressed hard against the each other as Andrea attempted to tread the waves of giddiness that came over her. Bodies writhed and she realized that at some point they had found their way to the bed and were laying down as he pulled apart her shirt and his mouth moved down her neck. His mouth found hers again and she was lost in the fury of his need.

This was right. This was meant to be. She knew this. She had always known this. He was for her and she for him. There was no other nor ever would be. His mouth moved back to her neck as he pressed his body against her.

"Aegnor," she gasped.

And suddenly he stopped, frozen, he stared down at her, his eyes wide.

"What did you say," he whispered.

Andrea blinked, confused, her head still blurry, vision unclear.

"What?"

"What did you say," he repeated.

"I don't ... Agner?"

Agner squeezed his eyes shut and dropped his head down so that his forehead was against her chest. She was certain he could feel her heart pounding against it. He seemed to tense as his arms came around her waist and he held onto her. She thought he heard him whisper the words no no no against her skin. She ran her fingers through his hair and tried to hold him back when he pulled away and slowly sat up.


But he still said nothing, he only sat at the end of the bed, hunched over with his head in his hands as he brought his ragged breathing under control.

As Andrea watched him compose himself, she became suddenly aware of the fact that her shirt was somewhere on the floor of the room and she was in nothing other than her bra and jeans. A mixture of embarrassment and anger began to come over her. If he did not want this to happen then he should have said so. This was not her fault … well, not entirely. She moved to get up and retrieve what was left of her shirt when a hand on her arm stopped her.

"No," he looked at her, eyes imploring, "no, please, do not go. Forgive me. I just … please, stay … please … don't leave."

Andrea paused. Something in voice seemed so fragile, so helpless, almost desperate. She sat down
next to him, her arms wrapping around his neck once more to pull him into an embrace. They lay back down on the bed as she held him, her fingers running through his hair.

They lay there for several moments that way, arms wrapped around the other, his head against her chest as he listened to the metronomic beating of her heart. After a while her breathing evened out to the slow repetitive rhythm of sleep and he unwound himself from her arms, careful not to wake her.

He stood there for the rest of the night, watching her in the dark.

She had said his name.

He was acting a fool. A careless selfish fool. Becoming caught up in the memory of something denied. And if he had taken her, what then? Does he tell her what he is? Does he tell her what he has done? She would think him mad and send him away and rightfully so. He did not deserve her and she did not deserve to be put through this.

*She is not Andreh!*

And yet he knew. When he looked at her, sleeping in his bed, her dark hair spread out around pale skin he knew. He could not let her go. Not again.

But what would be the cost?
Andrea woke the next morning to find herself alone in Agner's room. She rubbed her eyes and squinted at the morning sun that blazed through the tall windows.

*Would it kill the guy to have some curtains,* she thought as she sat up and looked around the room.

It seemed even larger in the light. She saw a shirt hanging on the closet door and realized that she did not have one. A hazy memory of something tearing played in the back of her mind. Sitting alone in the large bed with just her bra and pants with windows that had no curtains was beginning to make Andrea feel somewhat exposed so she got up and retrieved the shirt from the closet door. It was large on her but it would do.

She bent over and began to slip on her shoes when she noticed a small white flower on the floor next to them. She cupped the small pale bloom in her hand.

Belladonna.

She looked around the room and spotted a small dark berry near the trashcan and walked over to find the wreath inside, or what was left of it. It seemed to have taken some damage in the frenzy of last night. She reached down and cradled what was left of it in her hands as she walked down the hallway and into the living room. Still no Agner.

Andrea stood there for a moment unsure of what to do. She still was not sure of what had even happened. One moment he was all over her to the point that she could not even see straight and then he was gone. She walked over to where her jacket and bag hung on the back and began to dig around for a hair tie. She held the tie in her mouth as she stood up and combed her hair back with her fingers as she walked around. This was the first time she had ever been in his apartment without her host. Surely he would not fault her for looking around while she waited for a bit to see if he would return.

She could not help but notice again how there were no photos around. No images of friends or family frozen in time, no cherished memories captured in frames and hung on the wall or in a place of honor on the mantle or shelf. He had spoken before about not having any contact with his family anymore and she supposed that could happen. A falling out or conflict of some sort. But to have no photos of friends, especially with all of his travels struck Andrea as odd.

She walked past the fire place and back down the hall till she stopped at the door of the second room. She hesitated for a moment unsure of what to do. Would he be upset? He had to understand her interest in these things and besides, wouldn't he have locked the door if he did not want her going in, or at least have left a note. She turned the door knob and stepped inside.

She took in the smell of things that were old and trying to be preserved, a dry, musty sort of smell that Andrea had always liked. It meant they were cared for, paid attention to, cherished. The windows were covered in here, keeping the room dark and the precious items within protected from the damaging rays of the sun. The lights themselves were dim and created a soft glow that added to the ambiance. Many of the cases were sealed and Andrea thought several might even be air tight. She could have looked through the artifacts with in for hours or days on end and never get tired of it. But right now, at this moment her attention was pulled to a specific one.
She walked over to the case that held the dried out and flattened flowers, vacuum sealed in some sort of plastic to help preserve it. The weapons with their hypnotic swirls and designs seemed to pick up the little bit of light in the room and reflect it even brighter. She wondered how old they were. It seemed to her as if the blades could still be sharp. As her eyes followed the long curve of the blade she came upon a small case within this one. Inside of it was a piece of material. It was frayed along the edges but still held some color as the design was still visible. It seemed to Andrea as if it were a piece of some banner or perhaps a sigil or coat of arms. It also seemed familiar.

A circle within a diamond, and from the circle in the center eight rays extend like beams of light. It was a crest. It was a family crest. She did not know how she knew this. Just like how she did not know what the colors were, even though they were faded and gone. But somehow she knew they were gold, red, and pale blue. How did she know this? She has seen it before. Her heart began to race as her head felt heavy. Where had she seen this before? Her mind spun. She has seen this before. She squeezed her eyes shut as an image came to her mind.

An image of a man in armor and wild hair standing in the night, with eyes that shone with a peculiar light staring at her in pain and sadness, a banner snapping in the wind behind him …

"Andrea?"

Andrea gasped and spun around, knocking over a stand that held a vase, sending it crashing to the ground. She grabbed at the case to steady herself as hands came around her waist, helping to support her.

"Andrea?"

She looked up to see Agner staring at her with concern, his eyes shining in the dim light in a peculiar way…

"I'm … fine, I'm sorry I just … I'm fine really, I just have to … oh God the vase! I am so sorry I don't know what … I should go."

She pulled herself from his grasp and left the room.

"I am so sorry," she called back as she went down the hallway, "I just need to go. I am late. I didn't realize how late it was. I have to teach a lab today. I will call you, with the details for the weekend. Oh God that vase! I will make it up to you I promise!"

She grabbed her jacket and bag and made for the elevator, hitting the button several times.

"I am so sorry about the vase Agner, so sorry! I shouldn't have gone in there. It was stupid."

The elevator doors opened and she almost ran inside, hitting the button to close the door.

"I'll call you," she called out as the doors slid shut.

Andrea leaned back against the wall and stared at the ceiling. She had seen that symbol before of course. She had seen it many times, sometimes flying high upon a banner or being worn upon a vest that covered the armor of the man who wandered her dreams. The man who had taken on the likeness of Agner.

I am going crazy, she thought. I am going completely batshit crazy.
Aegnor never said anything as he watched Andrea run into the elevator in her haste to leave. After she was gone he turned and made his way back to the spare room and over to the case where she had been standing. He knew what was in there of course. He looked down at the items inside.

He had acquired them late in the fourth age, back when he was newly returned to this world. The world had already much changed by then with most of the exploits of he and his kin being passed into myth or legend or twisted for the purpose of some religion or following. Aegnor had found these particular items in what would be the modern day equivalent of a flea market or sale. The persons selling them having no idea of the past or the true worth of such things. But he knew their worth, and they were priceless.

She had recognized something of course, triggered some memory buried deep. Much like what happened last night. For both of them. He looked down at the broken vase, his hands becoming tight fists.

He almost did something unforgivable last night. Something that he could never take back. Something selfish and greedy. He allowed need and self-indulgent behavior dictate his actions. He would have taken her then and there, without regret or a second thought. Aegnor closed his eyes and his hands balled up even tighter. The taste and feel of her skin was still a fresh torment in his mind. For a moment he had her in his arms again, his Andreth, he held her without restraint, without fear of consequence. And when she had called out his name …. 

Aegnor let out the breath he was holding and opened his eyes. But she was not Andreth, at least not entirely. And he that somehow he was projecting his desires on to this girl who looked like his Andreth. That somehow he unknowingly put these images in her mind out of his own yearning for it to be true.

He had spent the entire evening watching her, till the sun began to push back the night, the sky going from black to the soft hazy grey of morning. He sat there watching her so intently, the temptation so strong to crawl back into her arms and finish what he had begun, he had crushed the small wreath of flowers he had made for her not even realizing what he had done. He knew then that he could not let this happen again. How could he? This was a child's dream that he held onto. It was impossible. What would have happened if he had given in and taken her? He would bind himself to her without her knowledge or consent? What would make him even entertain the idea that it would end well? Did he really thing he could just walk up and tell her who he was?

No, there was only one way for it to end. Her inevitable death and his lingering on, facing the ages once more without her. He had thrown the wreath away along with any hope he had held onto. He was a fool. And what he was doing to this girl was shameful.

Aegnor knelt down and began to gather up the broken shards from the vase, gathering the larger pieces and taking them out of the room and tossing them into the trash in the kitchen. He looked at the counter and saw the coffee he had gone out for. Two cups sitting next to each other. He had almost not returned to the apartment.

But he had returned. Out of some sick need and the lie he kept telling himself, that he would end this once and for all.

Again.

Aegnor turned suddenly and grabbed his keys and headed once more out of his apartment. He began walking, just where he was not sure, but he knew he had to get out of there. The memories that were being dredged up from the dark recesses of his mind were painful and mocking. He was lost upon the ice again. He had nowhere to go but forward, he was no longer able to go back.
You should have stayed dead Aegnor.

She is not Andreth.

He would just continue to tell himself that till he finally believed it.

When he finally stopped walking, he looked up and recognized the building he stood in front of. How typical that he should end up here. But then where else did he have to go? It was not open yet but he could wait. Waiting was the one thing he could do with ease. Several hours went by till the first employee showed up and then a few more hours till they opened the doors. Aegnor went inside and sat down. Who he was looking for was not here yet or they were not coming in at all. A possibility he found quite fitting given his current state. If she did not come in then he would take it as a sign from the Valar to move once more, perhaps somewhere in Asia this time. He always did enjoy Osaka. Aegnor laughed bitterly to himself. As if he Valar gave a damn about what happens to him.

Day became evening and he watched as the shifts began to change employees. She was the last to come in, working the later shift that would go well into the night. He waited till she was able to change out her register and get situated at the bar before he approached. When he finally did she turned around and faced him as if she had always known he was there. More than likely she did. She said nothing as he stood there, her dark eyes seemed to dissect his every move. Aegnor did not let that bother him though. He supposed she had every right to be suspicious of him. Who knew what she had been told. He sat down at the bar.

"I need to speak to Carnistir."

She said nothing after he spoke. She simply stood there, head tilted slightly, her dark eyes considering. Had it been any other time Aegnor could have sat there infinitely, waiting patiently for her to reply. It was something he had become quite adept at through the years. But tonight his mind was far afield, his focus off. He was desperate. He took in a breath and slowly let it out.

"Please, I need to speak to Carnistir."

"I heard you the first time," she said after a moment, her eyes still considering although they narrowed somewhat. "Agner right? So, what's your real name."

Aegnor could not help but notice it was not a question.

"Aikanáro Ambarato Arafínwëan … Aegnor."

Haley leaned against her elbows on the bar and gave a low whistle.

"Wow, that's a mouthful. You kids do like your flourish don't you," she replied with a little half smile. "You want something to drink?"

Aegnor was not sure if she was toying with him, for one of the second born she was very difficult to read. A rarity in this day and age of their kind. He could see why Carnistir liked her.

"No," he answered. "I only need to see Carnistir."

"Cirian."

"What?"

"Cirian," she said again, pushing away from the bar and grabbing a glass. "He goes by Cirian."
"Can you contact him?"

"Maybe," she walked over to the beer tap and began to fill the glass. "Where's Andrea?"

Aegnor began to feel a slight annoyance now. He was definitely beginning to see why Carnistir liked her so much. "She is not here."

"I can see that," she chuckled as she pushed the tap back to stop the flow of liquid and then turned her full gaze upon him. "This is about her right?"

Aegnor said nothing.

"Yeah it is," she quipped, her little half smile returning, "you look like shit. Here." She set the beer glass down in front of him. "Is she alright?"

"Yes of course she is," Aegnor's mouth tightened as he sat up a little straighter. That had come out a little more defensive than he had intended. But she had presumed too much with that. As if he would ever do anything to harm her. But if the young woman in front was bothered at all by his indignation, she showed nothing. She simply leaned back over the bar on her elbows and rested her chin in her hand.

"So you haven't told her then."

"Told her what."

"What you are of course."

"… No, I have not."

"Of course you haven't because she still likes you. But she isn't going to like you when you tell her and nothing you do will prepare her for this. There's nothing you can say or do that is going to make it any easier. There are only two things that can happen, she's either going to love you or she's going to hate you. And if she hates you, she will leave you. And you will have to let her leave. You can't force it on her or drag it out. You will have to let her go or you will only make it worse … for the both of you."

Aegnor did not speak. Truth be told he could not speak. He had been offended at first at her insinuation that something had happened to Andrea and then for her to assume she could speak freely with him about such personal matters that she could not possibly understand had infuriated him. But then he realized that she most certainly could understand. That she could understand perhaps, better than anyone. That she could understand from a point of view that he never could.

But then he realized that she most certainly could understand. That she could understand perhaps, better than anyone. That she could understand from a point of view that he never could.

He had been so self-absorbed in his own pain that he had never considered her view, the pain that she would face. She could very easily turn him away, send him from her as he had done so many ages ago. It had almost destroyed him when it had been his choice, what would it do if it were hers?

He looked hopelessly at the woman in front of him.

"I love her," he whispered.

He could only assume at the levels of pathetic he must have reached. Even he winced at the sound of his own voice. But the young woman's face seemed to soften as she gave him a sad little smile.
"I believe you," she whispered back.

Aegnor squeezed his eyes shut for a moment and gathered his composure before looking at her once more. Now it was his turn to lean forward on his elbows against the bar towards her.

"Haley, please, will you call Carnistir?" he asked again.

A familiar little half smile returned once more as a single eyebrow cocked up and amusement flashed in her eyes. Amusement and, Aegnor realized, something else. As her eyes moved past him he could see a light that burned within. A light that was not of Man.

"Now what makes you think that I haven't already?"

Aegnor followed her gaze towards the entrance to see Carnistir standing at the door, glowering. Aegnor sat up straight in his chair and made to rise, ready to deflect his cousin's obvious wrath towards him when a sound from behind him pulled him away.

"Oh please," Haley huffed from behind, "stop being so melodramatic and get in here."

Aegnor turned to look at her but she was already pushing herself away from the bar to grab another glass.

"Such a drama queen…" she muttered as she worked.

Carnistir slowly sauntered over to where Aegnor sat, stared down at him in that imperious way of his, and said nothing. Aegnor stood up. He decided to speak in Quenya in an attempt to show his cousin his sincerity and also to keep Haley from feeling uncomfortable from whatever might be said.

"Carnistir," he started, "please, I know we have not seen eye to eye –"

"We have never seen eye to eye," Carnistir interrupted, speaking in Quenya as well.

"– but," Aegnor continued, "I am willing to accept my fault in this and seek to amend it. I regret how our last meeting ended. It was not how I wished. Seeing you again brought up feelings and memories that had been buried deep within. I was reminded of how I once was and how I have been running from it ever since my return. Please Carnistir, you are the first and only one of our kind I have encountered … and my kin … and I never realized how much I needed that till now, regardless of who it is. You cannot tell me that you have not felt something of the same. Let us try again, please … I … I need your advice."

If Carnistir was moved at all by his speech he showed nothing.

"Well that must have been painful," he sneered.

Aegnor ground his teeth and kept his calm. "Will you sit with me?"

"Of course he will," Haley piped up from behind the bar. The both of them looked at her with surprise. "Just not here. If it was just one of you it would be fine but two of you, well that's just too much pretty in one place. You'll attract way too much attention. Come on."

She grabbed Aegnor's glass and the other glass she had been preparing when Carnistir arrived and jerked her head for them to follow. Aegnor made to move but stopped when he realized that Carnistir had not moved at all. He stood still as stone, his face unreadable. Haley turned around and stared silently back except her eyes narrowed and her stance was impatient. To the casual
observer it would seem that they were having some sort of staring contest, but Aegnor knew it was much much more. There was most certainly a contest going on but it was a contest of wills. There was a silent conversation happening, a silent communication that only those who are bonded could share. Something that was almost sacred was passing between them and Aegnor knew that, although he could not hear them, he witnessing something that was very personal. He looked away uncomfortably, like a child who was embarrassed at witnessing his elders having a spat.

They stood like that for several silent minutes. Carnistir never moving while Haley sighed impatiently and rolled her eyes incredulously, till finally she broke out into a wide smile.

"Okay then," Haley said brightly, "follow me."

Aegnor turned to look at Carnistir but he was already moving, an almost petulant look on his face. Aegnor stared at the tiny woman before him in disbelief.

"Back here," she called out over her shoulder as she led them to a booth in the very back of the bar next to the kitchen. "We use this booth to count out the register or our tips at the end of the night. No one sits back here and the noise from the kitchen should cover up your conversation. Now you to be good boys and play nice okay?"

She set down a glass in front of the both of them before leaning down and planting a kiss on Carnistir. When she stopped kissing him she kept her forehead against his and stared at him with a playful expression till, to Aegnor's surprise, Carnistir's face softened and he gave her droll smile as he swatted her away. Haley pulled back with a grin and then left.

Aegnor watched her return to the bar and then looked over at Carnistir. His cousin had gone back to his normally cool exterior, except that he seemed somewhat more relaxed. Aegnor was not sure of what to say after everything he had just witnessed and so he spoke the first thing that came to his mind.

"She knows Quenya?" he asked.

"She knows many things," Carnistir snorted as he lifted his glass, "although sometimes she thinks she knows more when she does not. But yes, she does know Quenya and Sindarin. It is one of the many memories that have come back to her."

Aegnor nodded as he looked at his own glass. "Andrea has remembered as well."

"Ah," Carnistir said, looking at Aegnor from over his drink, "so now we come to it. You have decided to go forward with her then?"

"No I … I just … I do not know."

Aegnor raked a hand through his hair only to drop it onto the table with a thud as he collapsed against the back of his seat with a sigh. He braced himself for the inevitable insult but it did not come. Well, at least not right away.

"Do you enjoy making yourself miserable?"

"Because I have to say," Carnistir sighed as he tapped long fingers against his glass, "you and your family have always seemed to excel at it. It is almost as if you thrive off of misery and duty and making yourself miserable with duty. I have to admit I was quite surprised when you and your brothers made the journey, and even more surprised to find you reborn. I mean, I would have
thought the halls would have been bliss for you what with the all the sorrow and tortured souls around. Even your father –"

"Can we please not discuss family," Aegnor interrupted, his voice carefully controlled. He willed his hand out of the tight fist that he had unconsciously balled it into. Carnistir did not seem to be concerned with his cousin's obvious attempt at control.

"As you wish." Carnistir shrugged. "I was merely making an observation," he mumbled as he took a drink from his glass. "So why am I here Aegnor, what exactly do you want from me?"

Aegnor shook his head. "I don't know," he laughed helplessly. "I have no idea. I do not know why I needed to find you. I was not even planning on ever seeing you again and yet somehow I ended up here. My mind is not right but then I no longer know what is right anymore anyway so why not find you. Her memories are a torment for me. Is she truly reliving these things or am I, in my desperation projecting them on her somehow? I almost took her Carnistir. Last night, I had her in my arms and I would have taken her, without her knowledge, but …"

Carnistir stared at him from across the table. "But what?"

"But … she said my name. Not the name I go by now, today. But the name she knew, then! Aegnor she said. She said Aegnor."

"So?"

Aegnor blinked. "So?"

"Yes," Carnistir hissed, "so! So she said your name. So what! Of course she will say your name, she is going to say a lot of things, many of which you will not like. So did you make the bond with her or not?!"

"Of course not!" Aegnor replied indignantly. Carnistir threw his hands up in the air as he now flung himself back against his seat as Aegnor did earlier.

"Of course you did not! I mean how could you?!

"Of course not!" Carnistir laughed as he pinched the space between his eyes as if he had a headache.

"I fail to see what is so amusing," Aegnor said stiffly. "Of course I did not. She does not know what that would involve and do to so without her knowledge would be a sacrilege."

"Oh bloody hell Aegnor, pull that prudish head out of your ass for once and look around you! The world has changed, the Old World is long gone along with its archaic rules for living! You have been given a second chance so why do you hang on so desperately to the past?"

"I am not hanging desperately – are you suggesting that I should have just taken her there and created the bond with her? Wrapping my fëa around hers till they are one combined, without any explanation as to what has happened? No explanation to what I have done? Are you implying that she just will not notice?"

"Oh do not be so daft, of course she will know," Carnistir sniffed dismissively. "She will know immediately. She may not know exactly what has happened but she will know something is different, just calm down."

"Is that what you did to this girl? Did you take her into the bond without her consent? Is that why she warned me?"
Aegnor had thought that Carnistir would become incensed at the accusation but instead his cousin merely gave him a considering look.

"Haley warned you?" he asked. "What did she say?"

"She told me that I cannot force this on her, on Andrea. That it would only make it worse for both of us."

Carnistir smiled and shook his head. "Of course she did," he said more to himself than to Aegnor.

"Well?"

"Well what?"

"Did you do this without her consent?"

"Of course I did not," now Carnistir was indignant as he slammed down his glass, "as if I even could take anything from her without her consent!"

"Now I thought I said to be nice," Haley said as she set two fresh glasses down on the table.
Aegnor and Carnistir sat up straight in their seats but still cut the occasional sideways glance in the other's direction.

"If you kids can't keep it down I am going to have to separate you," she added. Carnistir sighed loudly.

"We are fine, there is nothing here that concerns you thank you."

"Aw," she said with a smile, "remind me to add that to the list of things I'm supposed to give a shit about, mmkay?" Haley turned and looked at Aegnor. "I have a list dedicated completely to him you know," she said, gesturing to Carnistir as she walked away, empty glasses in hand.

Aegnor looked back at his cousin only to see him smiling after her as she made her way back to the bar.

"She has a strong spirit," said Aegnor.

"She is perfect," added Carnistir. "She is both delicate and powerful, a mix of silk and iron. Soft enough to kiss when you seek tenderness and yet strong enough to take into battle when you need victory. I could never take anything from her against her will. I love her too much and her will is too strong."

Aegnor believed him.

Carnistir pulled his gaze away from the woman at the bar and looked at Aegnor.

"So," he said as he adjusted himself in his seat to face Aegnor fully, "what has she remembered?"

Aegnor shook his head and looked at his glass.

"Bits and pieces really. It is as if certain things seem to bring out memories. She becomes almost lost in the moments, as if dazed. But she knows. She has repeated conversations I have had with her when … with Andreth. She recognized my family crest, and her dreams …"

"Her dreams?" prompted Carnistir.
"Her dreams are dark," Aegnor continued, "her dreams are of death."

As Aegnor spoke, Carnistir leaned forward, his elbows on the table as his hands came together creating a steeple shape against his chin.

"Mmmm," he said, tapping his fingers against his lips, "those are the strongest then. The ones that have stayed with her the longest. The painful memories. As she continues to spend time with you more will come. And they will be stronger, vivid, and much clearer. And if you should ever work up the courage to create the bond, be prepared for it will be as if a door will open in her mind and could even overwhelm her. The flood of memories could drive her to madness."

"Maddness?" exclaimed Aegnor.

"I said could, not would," clarified Carnistir. "Her memories and dreams are dark, which tells me that those were the memories she held on to the most in life. She continued to carry that pain to her death and beyond apparently." Carnistir studied Aegnor from over his fingertips. "Did something happen between the two of you, something that would cause her to carry this bitterness to her grave?"

"No I … no, I mean … I did not use her in some ill manner if that is what you are implying. I just … I did what I had to, what was called upon us to do. We were at war and we cannot … if I had had taken her to wife at that time I would have abandoned all that we had come to do, all who were depending on me. And not because she asked it of me but because I would need too. To keep her from harm, away from danger, because I loved her that much. I loved her enough that I was willing to abandon my own brothers, my own kin, to keep her safe! But in my heart I knew that she would never be safe because death would eventually take her regardless of my efforts, but … but not before it took me."

"So you broke her heart," Carnistir said matter-of-factly.

"That was never my intention," Aegnor spat angrily, "but yes, I broke her heart. I did what was necessary, what was right at the time. She was of Man, second born. Their gift is death. Am I supposed to sit and wait, to watch helplessly on the side as she ages and fades before me, unable to stop it? It would have been a torture for her as well. Not to mention the fact that I knew, I knew what was coming, what the future held for Angrod and I. I did not know exactly what would happen or how or even when, but I knew, in the darkness doom awaited. I did what I did to spare her."

"No. You did what you did to spare you, which is exactly what you are doing now."

Aegnor looked at Carnistir in all out shock and anger.

"You know nothing of –"

"Oh save your self-righteous indignation for someone else. You may tell yourself you did what you did to spare her but the truth of it is you did it to spare yourself the pain and because you were afraid of what would happen when you lost it, when you lost her. You loved her Aegnor. You loved a mortal woman doomed to die. You loved her so much you were willing to remain bodiless for eternity because you could not be with her. It frightened you. The fact that you could finally knowing pure unadulterated love only to have it snatched away by something you can never stop. The steady march of time. There is no shame in that Aegnor. The shame lay in the fact that you attempt to mask your fear out of some sense of duty that no longer exists."

At first Aegnor had felt rage so strong that he thought he may leap across the table, patrons be
damned. The urge to strike his cousin was so strong he was not sure he would be able to control it. But as Carnistir spoke something within him seemed to waken, to knaw at his conscious, and Carnistir's words began to ring of truth. A horrible guilt ridden truth. Yes he did what he did out of duty and obligation to his family and station, but he also did it out of fear. The fear of watching her fade away only be left to wander the ages alone with no hope of ever seeing her again, to know bliss only to have it snatched away by the cruel and never-ending continuation of time. The terrible reality of knowing he would never be able to have those moments again and to face the world alone without her had been terrifying to him.

The rage had drained out of him along with his will to fight. He felt like a child.

Carnistir for his part said nothing. He did not look down at Aegnor in that imperious way of his and the haughty tone of voice he normally took on had been gone as he spoke. For some reason that only made Aegnor feel worse. Carnistir drank from his glass as he let his words sink in. When he finally did speak, his voice was surprisingly gentle.

"You have a banner with your family sigil?"

Aegnor looked at him surprised.

"Yes, I found it. Some random market, a small woman selling scraps with no idea of what she had. Sometime late in fifth age I believe, I am no longer sure."

"Mmm, the years do start to run together after a while. I have not come across anything like that since my return."

"Have you found anyone else?"

"No. You?"

"No … well, I thought I did once, during the Second World War. I heard a voice singing –"

"Makalaurië?" Carnistir sat up and leaned in.

"That was what I thought, but then it stopped and I heard no more."

"Pity," Carnistir said softly as he sat back. "Although it would not surprise me if it were him I suppose. He was the only one of us, the only one who …" Carnistir's voice had dropped to a whisper and trailed off as his gaze had gone inward as he spoke. But then he snapped out of his reverie and looked back at Aegnor. "There are many things left from Arda that still roam the far corners of this earth, and not all of them as fair as we."

"Really?"

"You know about the fires of London in the 1600's."

"Yes, I remember, what of them."

"Balrogs."

"What?!" It was Aegnor's turn to sit up in surprise this time. "Balrogs?!"

"Mmmhmm," Carnistir replied as he finished his drink, "Balrogs. Small ones, weakened with time and age, but still Balrogs. A Balrog was responsible for the fire in Chicago back in 1871 although I believe some old woman's cow took the blame. I hunted that one down myself."
"You, hunted down a Balrog," Aegnor scoffed incredulously.

"I said it was small and weakened, but yes, I hunted down a Balrog," Carnistir replied, his old familiar haughtiness returning.

Aegnor sat back in his chair and folded his arms across his chest with a little smile.

"Impressive."

"Not really," Carnistir shrugged, "it was more of a mercy killing to be honest."

"I did not realize that Morgoth's pets still roamed the earth."

"Why not? We do. I am surprised you have not noticed yourself. They are there in many myths and legends of Men. They go by different names now, dragons, banshees, werewolves and vampires and so on. But there are still many things that remain hidden in the dark places of the world. I have made it a habit to dispatch them when I am able."

"How noble," Aegnor said giving his cousin a sideways glance.

"Yes it is, isn't it," agreed Carnistir, returning Aegnor's glance with a smirk of his own.

They sat in silence for several long moments, neither moving nor speaking. It was something they had all done in their youth, sitting in silent contemplation for hours at a time. It was soothing and peaceful, and hauntingly familiar. It was Aegnor who finally broke the silence.

"What shall I do then?" he whispered softly.

"I do not know Aegnor. What I do know is it will not be easy, for either of you and there will most certainly be pain. The question you must ask yourself know is, will it be worth it? And if so, will you be able to bear the price that must be paid, regardless of what the outcome will be? And there will be a price Aegnor. There will most certainly be a price."
Andrea rubbed at her eyes as she looked up at the clock on the wall. She was done at three and it was a quarter till. Good enough for her. She reached down and set her bag on the desk so she could set her things inside.

She was exhausted. She had left Agner's with the intention to return to her apartment for a quick shower and change only to find that she did not have the time. She ended up coming straight to the study lab in the same clothes she had on last night and no coffee.

No. Coffee.

She had been a rather sad excuse of a resource instructor at the study lab today. Spending almost her entire shift with earbuds in but no music as a ruse to portray the appearance of being occupied. In reality she simply wanted be left alone. She had managed to refrain from telling anyone to use Google though so she did not feel that she was a total loss.

She finished gathering her things and then locked up the room. She just wanted to get home and crash into her bed. The memory of last night and the events of this morning still weighed heavy in her mind. She teetered back and forth between giddiness and confusion when she thought about it. There was no doubt now as to how he felt about her. How could there be? If he had not pulled away from her she would have given everything.

But he had pulled away. And Andrea did not understand why.

Maybe it was as Kate had said. Maybe he was the type who took his time, who wanted to be sure. Truth be told, she should probably be doing the same thing. But this did not feel wrong to her. In fact nothing had ever felt so right and she found herself wondering if this is what being in love felt like. There was a want there that Andrea had never felt before. A need that only seemed to be sated when she was with him. So much so that she was willing to throw her usual caution to the wind and force her way through his hesitation.

Of course the reason he was hesitant could be that she was sneaking into his rooms and breaking his things. His very valuable, priceless things.

What had happened in there? This was becoming a bit of a habit for her now and Andrea wondered if she should go to a doctor and get check out. But then, what would she say? That she is having random moments of déjà vu that caused dizziness and light headedness and bouts of clumsiness?

It was the damn dreams. It had to be. She was unable to get a decent night's sleep because of them. And they had become far more vivid in the last few weeks, almost feeling like memories in a bizarre way. What was even more unsettling was that Agner had become a regular focal point of all of them. It was not exactly Agner of course, it couldn't be. But what had once been a faceless figure had taken on his appearance. The hair was longer and the clothes different but it was most certainly him. There were others that appeared as well, but they still maintained some anonymity, although more details seem to come out the more she had the dreams. In one dream she watched herself have a conversation with a man who looked like Agner but was not. But that one was hazy and vague and not nearly as frequent as the others. It still did not explain her reaction to the banner though.

Andrea knew she had seen it in her dreams but she could not remember if she had dreamt it first or if somehow she had seen it in passing, when she was first taken through the room. It was a frustrating nagging feeling that gnawed at her conscience. She knew it was a sigil, some sort of a family crest, but how? How did she know? How could she be so sure? It was so clear in her mind.
now. She could see it waving on banners, emblazoned on armor or embroidered into clothing. It almost made her dizzy again just thinking about it.

Andrea stopped outside the door to her apartment. If it had not been for her overwhelming lack of sleep and the severe case of caffeine deprivation she would have almost thought it were more of a true memory than just a shadowy dream.

That was ridiculous of course. God I need to sleep, she thought irritably. And coffee, a whole lotta coffee.

She unlocked the door and stepped into her apartment to find her roommate Katherine spread out on their small sofa, a smug smile splitting her face.

"Well hello," Kate practically purred with satisfaction.

"Don't even start –" interrupted Andrea.

"What? All I said –"

" – because I am not in the mood and –"

" – was hello so there is –"

" – it is not what you said but –"

" – no reason to be rude."

" – how you said it. So don't. Even. Start."

"I beg your pardon!" Kate shouted with mock indignation. "It was merely a simple greeting. For you to react so defensively is completely unnecessary … unlessssssss,"Kate leaned forward and rested her elbows on her knees and cupped her chin in her hands as her eyes narrowed in a deviant manner, "there is some reason for you to be so defensive? Hmmm?"

Andrea gave Kate a flat look as she closed the door behind her and then crossed to the sofa to drop her things and flop down next to her roommate. Kate leaned back across the sofa, her eyes never leaving Andrea.

"You are still wearing the same thing you had on last night," she observed, "minus one pale pink tee, size small." She reached across and tugged at the t-shirt Andrea was wearing. "That is not pink nor a size small."

"Thank you captain obvious," Andrea sighed. "I could really use some coffee."

"Details please."

"Coffee."

Kate leaned in closer to Andrea. "Details."

"Ugh, God Kate," Andrea sighed, "nothing happened. I just want some coffee."

Kate gave her an incredulous look.

"Nothing happened," she scoffed. "Nothing happened?! You go out and don't get home till the following morning, still wearing what you had on last night minus your shirt and the only thing you
have to say is "Nothing happened"? You are going to have to do way better than that my dear."

Andrea looked at her roommate from half lidded eyes for a moment before a small reluctant smile spread across her face.

"Okay, so maybe it was a little more than nothing," she said as she rose from the sofa and headed to the kitchen area. Kate jumped up from the sofa with a squeal and followed close behind her.

"I knew it!" Kate shouted as she clapped her hands eagerly. "So? Did you? Huh? Did you? You know! Did you check out all of his "artifacts"? And by artifacts I mean penis! Did you? Did you?"

Andrea rolled her eyes and gave Kate a disgusted look as she grabbed a mug from the cabinet.

"OMG Kate, really?"

"You're not answering the question!" Kate bounced up and down.

"No," Andrea sighed, "I didn't check out his "artifacts", ok?"

"Oh," Kate said, not even trying to hide her disappointment. "Really?"

"Yes really. Sorry. We just kissed."

"Kissed? That's it?"

"That's it."

Kate stood there for a moment, consternation furrowed her brow and her bottom lip seemed to protrude slightly. One eyebrow kicked up as she looked at Andrea.

"Was it a … good kiss?" she asked.

Andrea placed her mug in the Keurig and snapped down the top as the machine began to brew up. She turned and looked back at Kate, her arms folded across her chest.

"It was a very good kiss," she answered grinning widely.

The conversation devolved into fits of laughter after that, and for Andrea the release felt good. By the time she had finished telling her Kate everything, they had made their way to Andrea's room. Kate sat at the end of the bed with her chin resting on her knees while Andrea lay on her back looking up at the ceiling as she spoke.

"It was perfect," she said, "well, almost perfect. Up till the point when I smashed an urn that was, I am sure centuries old and just as valuable. I think that I may need to go to the doctor or something. I have been feeling just … weird or something, I don't know. What do you think? Kate?"

Kate just sat there, hugging her knees as a wry little grin pulled at the corners of her mouth.

"You like this one. Oh yes, you like this one a lot."

Andrea grabbed a pillow and threw it. Kate easily caught the pillow and jumped on top Andrea.

"You loooove him! You're going to marry him! And then you're going to sleep with him and have precious little pointy eared babies!"

"Oh my God you didn't!" Andrea laughed as she pushed Kate off of her. "And nobody said
anything about love or marriage. I mean, how many dates have we been on and last night was the first night anything happened? And nothing happened really, you know? So we kissed and our shirts came off, oooh scandal! He still stopped."

Andrea flopped back down on the bed and looked up at the ceiling as she hugged the pillow. Kate lay down on her stomach next to her.

"So you would have …" Kate left the question unfinished, hanging in the air.

"Yeah I would've. Right there. I mean that's stupid right?" Andrea sat up and looked down at Kate. "I mean, when it comes down to it I hardly know him. He never talks about himself or his family or anything. But there are times when I am with him when it feels like … it feels so … I don't know, familiar maybe? I know that sounds ridiculous and cliché and all but … ugh," she collapsed back against the pillows behind her, "I have no clue about this guy and yet it feels like … like, oh I don't know."

Andrea raked her fingers through her hair in frustration but Kate just laughed.

"Of course it seems corny and cliché Andrea, you like the guy," Kate said with a grin. "Sometimes things aren't that complicated. Girl meets boy, girl likes boy, and if he is lucky girl hooks up with boy. And if they are both lucky they get to repeat the last part again and again. You have to stop dissecting this and looking for problems. Just go with it." Kate sat up as she spoke. "So he's shy, taking his time, making sure it is right. You have never been one to rush into anything either, well, except for this that is."

Andrea rolled her eyes.

"Are you going to see him tonight?" Kate asked.

"I don't know, maybe."

"Well if you do, why don't you have him come here? You know, get the home field advantage?"

Andrea gave her a skeptical look. "And you will be where?"

"Hiding in the closet. Out silly," she said with a playful swat, "I'll go to Gabe's."

"Oh, so he does have his own place," Andrea muttered.

"Hey! Watch it," Kate warned as she stood up, "As I was saying, see if he wants to come here. This way you can reestablish some balance of power that you seem to so desperately want. Maybe this time you can uh, work through his shyness. But first take a nap and a shower. You look like shit."

Kate jumped through the doorway of the bedroom with a squeak as she dodged the pillow that was thrown at her. Andrea leaned back against the bed with a sigh. It was not some simple need for an upper hand. There was something else. Something beneath the surface within herself that Andrea could not quite put her finger on. She rubbed at her eyes. For all she knew he may not even want to come over after her little display this morning.

She would have to think about it later. She grabbed her phone and sent out a quick text and then lay back down. Her eyes had begun to feel heavy. She would just close them for a moment and take a quick shower. She set the alarm on her phone and placed it on the pillow next to her head. If he called or sent a text she would know and if not, she would get up and shower anyway. Right now she was too tired. She would close them only for a second.
He kneels before her, clinging desperately, his face buried against her chest. His arms wrap around her waist so tight she can barely breathe. She says nothing though, so grateful she is for this contact. For any contact. Her own fingers lace their way through his hair and she embraces him back with her own gentle and tender need. Her hair dances about her face as the wind causes it to mix with his. Her dark locks almost seem to grasp at his gold. He is pressed so closely against her. She can feel the rhythmic pounding of his heart, the warmth of his skin through her clothes, the rise and fall of his chest as he takes each ragged breath. It is then that she realizes he is weeping.

Aegnor awoke with a start. Had he been sleeping? He had returned to his apartment that night, after seeing Carnistir, and went to the roof as he often did. He could not see the stars from there but perhaps that was for the best, there was no comfort in their light. They seemed aloof now, mocking him with the memories they brought forth.

But he did enjoy the feel of the air on his skin, the sounds of the city in his ears. Sometimes he would open himself up and listen to the lives that were bustling in a rushed frenzy down below. He would stand there with his eyes closed and take in the mad rush of life around him. It was something he did often in his youth. He would stand outside under the stars, his eyes closed, the wind would move around him as he would become one with his surroundings. He could lose himself sometimes for days this way. And while the world had much changed from when he was young, the effects were still much the same. Soothing, calm, serene.

At least it used to be.

He stood as he always did, silent, motionless, opening himself to the world around him. Perhaps it was the way the wind caused his hair to brush against his face, perhaps it was due to the fact that he had just spent the better part of the evening speaking in a language that was long forgotten with a ghost that should have been even longer dead, or perhaps the experience of having her in his arms, his mouth against her skin, her body pressed to his was still too fresh in his mind.

No matter what the reason, the dream had come upon him quite suddenly.

No, it was not right to call it a dream. To call it a dream would lessen it somehow, writing it off as a fantasy or delusion. No, this was no fabrication, no invention of a wandering mind.

This had happened. It was real.

Aegnor squinted up at the sky. The sun was high above. It had been dark when he had come out. He made his way down the ladder and to the window into his bedroom. He walked over to where he had set down his things from the night before and retrieved his phone and froze. There were several missed calls, a few messages, a text and voicemail from Andrea, but that is not what caused him to pause. It had been Monday evening when he had seen Carnistir and the dark early hours of Tuesday morning when he had taken his reverie on the roof. It was late Thursday afternoon now.

He had lost two and a half days.

Aegnor clicked his tongue in dismay. He was becoming careless with his rest, his reveries were becoming longer without his knowledge. He could lose weeks if he were not careful. He looked at his messages. Two short texts from Andrea, one asking him if he would like to come over and the
other asking him if he was still alive, punctuated with a lol that he was certain was not sincere. He went to his voice mail.

"Hey, so, just calling to see if ... to say hello and um, to see if, to see what's up. I hadn't heard from you in a while, I mean a couple of days isn't a while, I mean it is but, I don't ... ok so I just need to know if you are still interested in coming with me upstate this weekend. If you are I am leaving tomorrow around eight. If you aren't, well ... either way I am leaving at eight, with or without you. If you can, cool. If not, no big deal. Ok bye."

Aegnor sat down at the foot of his bed. She was not happy. The finality of her message told him very clearly that if he did not show he would not see her again. She would turn away from him. Write him off as just another wasted moment, another disappoint to walk away from. She would move on.

Aegnor could not help but wonder if that was such a bad thing.

He also could not help but wonder if perhaps Carnistir was right. Perhaps he did enjoy making himself miserable.

He set the phone down, stood up and walked out of the room.

Andrea brought the last of her bags towards the door and set them down. She went over her list once more in her mind. Sleeping bag, tent, clean underwear, plastic bags, toilet paper. It was a full day's drive upstate to Bloomingdale and then up route 3 to the cabin. She would have to stop and get the trailer hitch if she wanted to do any riding while up there. She would of course. She had already called ahead to the stables and asked Mr. Carter to have the trailer ready, surprising him when she asked that he not only have Lilly ready but Victor as well.

Of course that may no longer be necessary.

She had not heard from Agner all week. She had sent a text asking him if he would like to come over for a change. When she did not hear anything she had called only to hang up when it went to voicemail. So she sent a second text asking if he were still alive and to let her know if he wanted to come over. She even threw in a lol at the end in some sad desperate attempt to make it sound casual. When she still did not hear anything she had called once more only to hang up yet again when it went to voicemail. She tried two more times before she became truly angry. It would show that she had called on his phone. He had to have seen it. He had to have known she was trying to reach him.

It was really only a matter of time before she lost all patience.

It was not like she could not take a hint, although she did not understand why he had to be an ass and ghost her this way. He could have simply just sent a text with some pathetic excuse, anything would have been better than this. She just could not understand what had happened.

And so, whether out of some pitiful last attempt at reaching him, or some feeble chance for him to redeem himself she called one more time, this time leaving a voicemail. If he did not contact her after that, if he did not show or acknowledge her in some way, then she was done. It would not be the first relationship that had ended this way and she was certain it would not be the last. She just could not understand why it had to be him.
Andrea looked at the clock in the kitchen. Ten minutes till eight.

Kate walked up next to her where she stood at the door and began to help her pick up her things to take down stairs.

"Are you sure you don't want me to come?" she asked as she slung a bag over her shoulder. Andrea shook her head.

"No, it's okay. I would prefer to be alone anyway. Really, I'm fine. I promise."

Kate did not argue with her. She had gotten up at the same time as Andrea this morning, prepared to keep her promise to go with her if Agner did not come. But Andrea knew Kate hated camping almost as much as she hated waking up early in the morning. She would not make her friend come. There was no reason to have two miserable women on this trip.

They headed down stairs and outside into the cool damp grey of morning. They set down the bags next to the front steps of the building where Kate would wait with her things while Andrea walked around to the next block to the parking garage where she kept her jeep. Everything requires rent in this city.

Andrea cranked the engine to life and let it warm up. She closed her eyes and took a breath. She was not going to let this define her. She would let it hurt, she could not stop that, but it would not alter her perception of herself. Rejection is a part of life. She knew the risk. Had she not have taken the leap she would have always wondered. Now she knew.

He's an asshole.

She opened her eyes, threw the little jeep in reverse and pulled out of the garage. She made her way around the block and came around to the front of her building only to have her chest tighten as her eyes went wide and her pulse quickened.

Kate stood in front of the building with her things, just as Andrea had left her except for one glaring difference. Next to her, with a small bag strapped across his back stood Agner.

Andrea pulled up to the front of the building and slowed to a stop. She sat there for a moment and looked at the two figures before her. Kate stood perfectly still and looked directly at Andrea, eyes wide with disbelief. Agner stood about a step behind her roommate with his hands in his pockets as if his being there were the most normal thing in the world. Kate walked up and opened the passenger door.

"He just showed up! What do you want me to do? Do you want me to spit at him? Do you want me to go bitch mode? Do you want me to call Gabe? I could tell him to beat him up! Do you want me to be nice? What do I do?!" she blurted in a hushed whisper.

Andrea sat there for a second. She had no idea what to tell Kate to do since she herself had no idea what she should do. She looked at her roommate.

"I got this," was all she said. That seemed to satisfy Kate who got out of the jeep and began to gather Andrea's things. Andrea walked around to where Agner stood.

"Hey."

I am a pathetic idiot.

"I was hoping the invitation for this weekend still stands."
"I don't know," Andrea shrugged. "I mean I never heard anything from you."

"Your message said to show at eight in the morning."

"Yeah, well that was before. You never bothered to answer me at all so now Kate was going to go
with me. She really wants to go."

A noise from behind Andrea told her that Kate had dropped some of her things as she spoke.
Andrea ignored her.

"Ah yes, of course," he said looking down, "it would make sense that you had made other plans."

"I didn't make other plans. I was always going, with or without you."

"I understand," Agner replied and began to turn away.

"Where are you going," Andrea demanded. Agner turned and gave her a confused look.

"I was leaving," he answered slowly.

"Why?"

"Because, I am no longer invited?" he questioned.

"Who said that? Did I say that? I never said that."

Agner stood stock still. The line he walked seemed to have become even more perilous, if that
were possible.

"So then," he said hesitantly, "what did you say."

"I said Kate wants to come, not that she was. I said I was going to go on this trip whether you were
going to go or not so ..." she paused, looking at him.

Agner looked over at Kate who was busying herself furiously with loading the jeep.

"So ..." he replied.

Andrea's mouth pressed into a tight, thin, frustrated line. She did not like playing games like this.
She hated when women did things like this to men. She found the whole fishing for answers to be a
sad feeble thing to do. But she need to hear it from him. She needed to hear him say what he
wanted. She desperately needed to know. She looked him in the eye as she spoke.

"So do you want to go or not."

Agner stared back at Andrea and for a moment that strange and yet familiar feeling came over her
again, causing her to almost sway under the intensity of his gaze. It seemed to her as if the strange
light that reflected in his eyes flared briefly as he spoke.

"Very much Andrea."

"Okay," she answered softly. "Put your stuff in the back and let's go."

Agner said nothing as he did as he was told. It was probably a good thing. Andrea looked at Kate
who stared wide eyed back at her, grinning stupidly. She mouthed the words "good luck" as Andrea walked around to the driver's side of the car.
Aegnor reclined against his pack and watched as his brother fletched another arrow. The steady methodical rhythm of Angrod’s hands as they moved about their task had lulled him into a relaxed medative state. Time and surroundings had little meaning on him when like this. He would retreat within, blending living night and deep dream, as was their way when it came to rest. Eyes wide open as his mind wandered. Perhaps it was due to the open starlit sky, or the repetitive motion of his brother’s work, Aegnor did not know. What he did know was that it had been some time since he found respite this way. Not since his youth. Not since before the ice.

Aegnor blinked, suddenly aware. He sighed. Leave it to him to ruin a much needed peaceful moment. He extended long arms as he arched his back with a stretch. It was still dark but the day was not far off. It was probably for the best that he began to prepare to leave anyway. He stood up and ran his fingers through thick hair in a vain attempt to tame it but to no avail. He sighed again. It would just have to do.

Angrod did not pause in his work as Aegnor began to move about the small camp. Once the small amount of belongings had been gathered Aegnor gave a low whistle that carried through the night. After a moment he was answered with a soft whinny and nicker as the three mounts materialized from the dark. Aegnor smiled as the lady Andeth’s horse nuzzled his hand in search for a treat. His mount, Arveldir was far too proud to seek out treats but still he watched Aegnor closely to see if anything would be given. Erthor crossed over to Angrod and nudged him with his head.

"Yes, Yes," soothed Angrod as he scratched Erthor beneath his chin, "it is early but you know how he is."

Erthor gave Aegnor a curious look.

"I am going to check the traps and see if there is anything to prepare before we go," Aegnor said with a shake of his head. He glanced back at the small tent that had been raised for their charge. "There is still time before the first light begins to break, it will not hurt to let her sleep."

"She is not sleeping," Angrod said as he continued to wrap a line around the end of the bolt.

Aegnor turned to look at his brother.

"What?"

"She is not sleeping," Angrod repeated.

"What do you mean," Aegnor asked slowly.

"I mean she is not sleeping," Angrod replied, "as in she is awake, as in she is not in her tent."

"Not in her tent?" Aegnor said confused. "Where is she?"

"She got up some time ago," Angrod answered unconcerned. He held up the arrow and stared down the shaft, examining his work. "She wanted to walk down to the water."

"The water!" Aegnor exclaimed, looking at his brother in disbelief. "And you let her go?"

Angrod set the freshly fletched arrow down on his lap and gave his brother a quizzical look.
"It is hallowed ground Aegnor, she is perfectly safe."

"Perfectly safe," Aegnor spat as he grabbed up his sword and fastened it around his waist. "There is nowhere in this land that is perfectly safe. You should not have let her go alone Angrod. I do not know what in this world would have possessed you not to alert me to her leaving." Aegnor snatched up his cloak.

"You were resting," Angrod answered as he watched Aegnor wrap his cloak around his shoulders and march off towards the lake. "And it seems as if you could use some more!" he called after his brother's retreating back.

Six hours in a car when on a trip can seem like long time.

Six hours in a car when on a trip, when angry, can seem like an eternity.

Not much was said on the ride up to the cabin. Not that much could have been said anyway. The jeep was quite efficient when it came to going from point A to point B, off road or on. But sound of the engine and the noise from the chasee when on the road was deafening. In order to talk over the roar of noise from the jeep one would have to talk loud. And Andrea did not feel like shouting. And so she stuffed her earbuds into her ears and turned on her music and simmered in silently.

Agner on the other hand seemed quite content to sit in silence. She thought she would get some satisfaction out of seeing him fold in half in order to fit in the jeep but now he just sat there, fingers laced together across his chest and head back, as if he were day dreaming. This only seemed to irritate Andrea even more.

They stopped twice for gas. Each time Agner offered to drive and each time Andrea told him no with a silent shake of her head.

It was petty of course, the way she was acting. But she could not seem to help it. She was so angry. Angry at him for ignoring her. Angry at him for making her care. Angry at him for his nonchalant attitude towards her anger.

She was angry at herself too. She was angry that she did care. Angry that she wanted to see him again. Flat out furious at her relief that he chose to come.

And so, for Andrea, a trip that was already long was made even longer due to her petulant silence.

They arrived in Bloomingdale around three in the afternoon but would not make for the cabin just yet. Bloomingdale was a small hamlet on the Saranac river. Once a busy logging town, now the camping/hiking trade is what kept it alive. Andrea spent much of her childhood coming here with her father and siblings. The memories from her youth seemed to lift her mood and she found herself smiling as they pulled up to the gate of a small ranch house. Andrea climbed out of the jeep and went to the speaker box by the gate and pushed the button. After a moment the box crackled to life as a voice came through.

"Yes?"

"Ms. Carolyn? It's me, Andrea …"

"Andrea?" the voice crackled back. "You're here already? You must've flew! Come in, come in!"
Andrea climbed back in the jeep as the gate slowly opened. Agner looked around curiously.

"Is this the cabin?" he asked.

"No," she said with a smile as she drove forward, "not yet. We have to pick up some friends first."

They continued up the gravel drive to the house. It was a simple one story surrounded by horse pastures and the Adirondacks. As they drove up, an older woman who looked to be in her late sixties came outside with a wide smile. Andrea had barely parked the jeep before the woman had come down from the porch and embraced her.

"Ah Andrea! My sweet, sweet girl, how are you? So good to see you!"

"I'm fine," Andrea replied, "it's good to see you too."

"Oh my, you brought a friend! You've never brought a friend before," Ms. Carolyn observed, peeking over Andrea's shoulder. "Some one special?"

Andrea looked behind her to Agner who was just exiting the jeep. Her smile became tight.

"Maybe," she answered, sounding a little cryptic. Ms. Carolyn raised an eyebrow.

"Well feel free to leave him here," the older woman said with a mischievous smile.

"And what would your husband say?" Andrea laughed.

"Jim? What he don't know – my," she exclaimed as Agner walked up, "you're a tall one."

Agner smiled and extended his hand. "It's a pleasure Ms. …"

"Gadsden," she said finishing his sentence and taking his hand, "Carolyn Gadsden." She shook Agner's hand and gave him an appreciative look before turning back to Andrea. "Well go ahead and bring the jeep around, Jim's getting the trailer ready for you."

She headed around to the back of the house as Andrea and Agner went back to the jeep.

"Where are we going?" Agner asked as Andrea cranked up the engine.

"Around back to the barns," she replied as she watched the side of the house. After a moment an ATV cart came around to the front driven by Carolyn. She waved them on to follow.

"She seems quite tenacious," he said as Andrea pulled around. Andrea just laughed.

"Yeah, you could say that. She and her husband work for my aunt and uncle. They owns all this and the cabin. They're kind of caretakers of the property for them. They've been here since I was little."

"You're uncle," Agner said softly.

"Yeah, I spent a lot of time with my aunt when I was little, especially after my mom died."

Agner said nothing as they continued down the gravel road, eventually arriving at the barn. They sat in the jeep for a moment and watched as a man lead a horse out from the stable over to where a second horse was already tied off. Andrea looked over at Agner with a wide smile.

"I hope you can ride English saddle," she said and hopped out of the jeep.
Aegnor had remained quiet throughout the majority of the journey. It did not take entering one's mind to tell that she had no desire to speak to him. And he could not blame her. He would have to make amends and it was not going to be easy. So he sat back and let his mind wander, admiring the mountains that rose up around them as they traveled. The scenery was beautiful and with her so close he found himself drifting back to memories in time that were long lost.

He became lost in his own thoughts. Not wanting to dwell on what was right or wrong, on what was proper and moral. It had been a long time since he had come to the mountains or returned to nature. There had been an age when he would have made a trip like this on foot and more than likely would have made better time. But such a thing would have been looked on as strange today and Aegnor made it a point not to stand out. Something that was becoming more and more difficult.

He had made the decision to tell her everything. Who he is, where he is from, how her past is his. It terrified him in a way that he had never experienced in all of his long years. She would think him mad of course. She would send him away. The time of his people had ended ages ago and if things were as they should be he would not even be here. He did not belong here.

But here he was, with the only being he had ever been in love with returned to him.

He had been mentally preparing himself for the inevitable rejection.

They had arrived at their destination rather quickly in his mind. Or at least what he thought was their destination. It turned out to be just a stop to retrieve something of value before continuing on. He stood back as she greeted the older woman at the door warmly. He took his time coming from the jeep, not wanting to interrupt their reunion. His feeling of elation at hearing he was the first person she had ever brought here was quickly squashed at Andrea's doubt as to whether he was someone special. He supposed he had that coming.

Aegnor walked over to the fence where the first horse was tied off. It was a tall dark bay that looked at him with large eyes as his ears flicked to attention. His chest was deep and wide and the croup long and level and he stood on legs that were clean and heavily muscled. He was beautiful. As if in acknowledgement to the thought, the bay lowered his head and pressed it against Aegnor's chest and Aegnor could not help but smile. He suddenly felt as if he were in the presence of an old friend and it seemed that when he looked into those large brown eyes, there was some sort of recognition there.

"Estaman mellyn?" he whispered softly.

"Victor," a voice called from behind him and he turned to see Andrea walk up, leading the second horse. Aegnor smiled.

"What?" he replied back as he scratched the tall bay under the chin.

"You asked him his name, its Victor. He's a Percheron. He was for my brother originally but Brandon never rides so I kind of adopted him. This," she said, turning to the smaller, lither gray behind her, "is Evy. She is Andalusian. A little smaller and more compact than Vic but just as strong. Aren't you girl? Yes you are," she cooed as she scratched the gray's ears before glancing over at Aegnor with a grin. "He likes you."

"I like him," he said softly.

"Good," Andrea chirped as she tied off the rope.
Aegnor stood frozen in place as he watched her cross over to the trailer to continue her greetings and assist the older gentleman, who Aegnor assumed was Jim, with the hitch. But he could barely register them at the moment.

She had understood him. He had spoken in Sindarin and she had understood him.

She did not realize she did. It was an unconscious reaction to hearing the words. She is wrapped up in the moment, she is happy here, at peace, distracted and yet focused. Aegnor's heart pounded within his chest.

They stayed at the little ranch for a short time more. Just long enough to sit and have a cup of coffee and allow the three to reminisce. Aegnor sat quietly most of the time and allowed them their moment. He listened as they talked of Andrea's childhood with her family and told stories of mischievous children who enjoyed hiding horse droppings in an unsuspecting victim's boots. Aegnor enjoyed this, watching Andrea as she laughed freely with the occasional cry of protest only to be followed by more bouts of laughter. For the first time in ages, Aegnor felt an almost overwhelming need for family.

Eventually, much to Aegnor's dismay, the conversation began to wrap and they loaded the trailer with their precious cargo and set out on the road once more. They did not travel long before arriving at the cabin. Aegnor was surprised at the size. He had assumed it was nothing more than a small one room with a bath but this was much more. It was a three bedroom, one bath two story with a shelter in the back for the horses.

They set the horses in the back and began to unload their supplies for the weekend from the jeep. After the majority of supplies where put away, Aegnor stepped out onto the porch and sat down on the top step. Framed by mountains, the setting sun's reflection on the water was quite stunning. Footsteps from behind alerted him to Andrea's presence as she crossed the porch and took a seat. He turned and looked over to see her curl her legs up beneath her as she made herself comfortable in the hanging chair at the end of the porch. He leaned back against the post and braced himself for the oncoming storm.

"I love it here," she said as she stared out towards the mountains.

Not exactly what he expected.

"I can tell," he responded cautiously. Andrea sighed and relaxed back in the chair even more.

"Tell me about your home."

Aegnor blinked. "My home?"

"Yes. Where you are from? Where did you grow up? Who were your friends when you were a kid?"

"It's been so long," Aegnor said looking down at his hands, "I am not sure what there is I can tell …"

"But you have to remember something. A story from when you were a kid? Did you get in any trouble I should know about?"

"Nothing I can think of at the moment. My brothers and I were not the type to seek out trouble, well, except perhaps once … although I did have some cousins who excelled at it."

"Oh?" Andrea looked over at him, "They sound interesting."
"That would be an understatement," Aegnor muttered.

"Were you close?"

"Who?"

"You and the trouble cousins. Were you close?"

"Ah no," Aegnor chuckled, "well, perhaps with some of them."

"What happened?"

"The … choices we made in life drove us apart."

"Oh," Andrea frowned apologetically, "sorry."

"No, no, it is alright," Aegnor waved off her concern with a smile. "They were known for keeping to their own. I was far closer to others."

They were silent for a while as the sun dipped lower in the sky. Aegnor leaned back against the post once more and listened to the sound of the horses in the background.

"What about your parents?"

"Hmm?" he said distractedly.

"Your parents?" Andrea asked again. "Where are they?"

"Ah, yes. They are … home …" he said looking out on the water. "They never left," he added softly.

"So they're still around?"

"Around?" he gave Andrea a questioning look.

"Alive."

"Oh yes, yes," he said thoughtfully, "I would think they are."

"You would think?" Andrea laughed. "You don't know?"

"No, unfortunately I do not."

Andrea stopped laughing and gave Aegnor a bewildered look. "You don't talk to them? You don't see them at all?"

"No."

"Oh. I'm sorry I brought it up," she apologized.

"It's all right. As I said earlier, the choices we made …" he gave Andrea a reassuring look. "I came to peace with it some time ago."

Andrea shook her head and look back out at the mountains. "I would give anything to see my mother again."

"How did she …" Aegnor stopped, suddenly uncertain as to how to finish the question.
"Die?" Andrea finished for him. "Its okay you can ask. It happened while she was pregnant with my sister. They went to the hospital for some sort of placental tearing I believe. While she was there, she said she had a headache so they gave her some pain medicine. A few minutes after that she stopped breathing. They had to deliver my sister by emergency c-section. It was a massive stroke my father said."

"Andrea," Aegnor said with a low gasp, "I am so sorry. I had no idea."

"Relax," she soothed with an amused smile. "I hardly remember much. I was only four years old. I was sent to stay with my aunt and uncle around that time too. They went above and beyond to keep me distracted." Andrea climbed out of the chair and stretched. "Come on, it's getting dark. I'm going to get some things packed. Tomorrow we'll take the horses out to the camp site but we have to check in with the trail register first. Feel free to take a shower, I'll get the stuff together."

Aegnor stood up as she spoke.

"I could help you," he offered.

"Oh no. I got this. Besides," she said with a little half smile, "I'm still pissed at you. Don't even think that I'm not."

Aegnor winced and gave her an apologetic look. "I understand."

"Good! You can pick any room you want to stay in," she called over her shoulder as she walked into the cabin. "Just make sure it's not the one I'm sleeping in."

Aegnor watched Andrea as she made her way to the kitchen. He looked back once more towards the water. What had happened to Andrea's mother hit home once more just how fragile the second born still are. Even in this day and age, with all of their accomplishments in medicine and healing, they could still be brought down so easily. He felt the familiar inner turmoil inside him. Is this right? What is right? There was only one thing he knew what right with absolute certainty.

He did seem to enjoy making himself miserable.

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_Aegnor made his way down the small path through the trees. His brother was right of course, she would be safe here, the Black Foe would not dare to challenge Queen Melian for risk of failure. Still, to allow her to roam the banks alone was foolish. They were charged with her care and if anything should happen to her it would lay upon their hearts. Angrod was far too lackadaisical at times._

_He came through the trees to find the Tarn Aeluin before him. Even he had to give pause to marvel at its beauty. It was a mirror to the sky and made seem as if the stars were all around. He could see why the Lord Thingol would tarry here. He could see why the Lady Melian would remain._

_He glanced around the shore to see a small silhouette perched upon a rock over the water. Aegnor felt himself smile in spite of his annoyance. Between the sky and the water she was surround by the brilliance of Varda. He could not fault her for this. It was only natural to seek out such beauty. He made his way to where she sat, allowing for his cloak to make soft brushing noise so as not to startle her. If she noticed she gave no sign as she continued to look down upon the water._

"My lady," he called softly, "my lady Andreth, you should not be out here."
"Beautiful isn't it?" she whispered back, still looking upon the water. "I had been told stories of this place, in my youth. Fanciful stories of unimaginable beauty and magic … and love."

"Yes my lady, but," Aegnor smiled and took another step towards her, "we really should return."

"I can see why they stayed here," she continued, "here together. Why they fell in love. I think it would be almost impossible not to fall in love with someone here."

Aegnor chuckled. "I would think it completely impossible not to."

"Do you," she spoke in hushed tones, "do you truly believe that to be impossible?"

Something in the lady's voice pulled Aegnor's attention away from the sky above. He looked down only to find her attention fixed upon the Aeluin and so he turned his gaze and sought her reflection in the water.

"Yes," he whispered back. "Yes, truly I do."

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He stood outside and looked to the night sky. Much time had passed since he had last seen so many stars. He likened it to diamonds strewn across a dark blanket. Something stirred deep from within him, something he has not felt since, well, since …

He laughed softly and shook his head. He had no memory of the last time he had felt this, but to be fair he had no memory of the last time he had felt anything. But now, as he stood outside beneath the brilliance of the canopy above him, something gnawed from within. A longing. A pull on his fëa.

He closed his eyes.

He wore only denim jeans. No shirt or shoes. The air was crisp and the grass damp beneath his feet, but he did not feel it. Not in the way Men do.

For brief moment he could see his brothers' faces. He could hear his sister's laughter. He could feel the loving touch of his mother and the strong embrace of his father. The wind gently brushed at his hair and carried their voices in the air. Horses whinnied and nickered from somewhere behind him as images of his many cousins came to the fore. Images of riding through the wild or of laying upon white sand after swimming along the coast. Images of happier times before the bitterness and resentment took hold, before the darkness came.

A swell of emotion came upon him. Joy tinged with sadness and laughter mixed with tears.

He was homesick.

He eyes flicked open.

The sky was still dark but for the tiniest hint of light that began to turn the dark blue of night into the cool slate grey of morning. Aegnor frowned. Time is so fleeting. He had spent the entire night out here, standing alone in the dark. The strange sensations from the flood of feelings that coursed through him made him easily distracted, careless.

He turned and looked back at the dark cabin. He could understand why she came here. He could see how one could find peace here. It had been an age since Aegnor had come into the more wild
places of the world. Mainly because there were so few left. But also due to the feelings that were
dredged up when he did. The memories and need for home. It would be easy to lose oneself to the
past here. Something he could not allow.

If he listened hard enough he could hear her breathing. The soft intake of breath followed by a slow
exhale. If he listened hard enough he could hear the soft rustle of covers as she readjusted herself
in her sleep, a small and slender arm stretching out as she unconsciously curls herself around a
pillow.

His hands tightened into fists as his muscles tensed and he resisted every urge within him to go to
her. And he longed to go to her. But in the end he did not go. He would not go even though she was
softening to him again, her initial anger almost spent. If he pursued she would give herself to him
which was why he did not pursue. There was too much that had to be told, too much that had to be
brought forth out in the open before he could ever allow such a thing to happen. His cousin's voice
drawlled through his head.

"Do you enjoy making yourself miserable?"

Aegnor smiled to himself and released the tension with a long slow exhale of the breath he had
been holding. He could just imagine Carnistir's glee as he pointed out Aegnor's misery. It irritated
Aegnor to no end at just how easy it was to give Carnistir what he wanted as well. With a shake of
his head he began to walk slowly around to the back of the cabin.

It was a strange fate that he should find his cousin after all this time. And not just any cousin, but
this cousin. Carnistir Moryofinwë Fëanorion. The one, no, the only cousin he had ever despised.
The irony was not lost to him.

Aegnor had never felt disagreeable to any of his other cousins, even though Carnistir's father had
been quite the bone of contention for many in his extended family, his uncle had always had
always been tolerable when around Aegnor's father, one might say his uncle was almost accepting
of Aegnor's father at times. But accepting might be a bit of a stretch as Aegnor could never
remember his uncle not addressing his father as his half-brother. And yet, despite the ever flowing
under current of animosity of his elders, he had been quite close to two of Carnistir's brothers
whom he often spent time hunting or traveling with, and had great respect for the eldest of
Carnistir's brothers, finding them to be fair and far more reasonable than their father.

But Carnistir, Carnistir he had never liked. Always aloof and haughty and prone to outbursts and
temper tantrums that could rival that of the most rotten child. He was vain and selfish and after the
death of his father and the return and abdication of his brother, somethingan action that Aegnor had
felt was a righteous action to take, Carnistir had seemed to become even colder and self-serving.
Something Aegnor did not think could be possible. The final straw for Aegnor had been Carnistir's
insolent display of contempt towards Thingol and his people after they had welcomed them. No,
they had never gotten along and Aegnor had never been of a mind to try.

But now, there seemed to be some sort of bizarre camaraderie that was forming between them. The
fact that Aegnor would even seek solace from Carnistir, and that Carnistir would even be willing to
give it, would have seemed an impossibility in another age.

But then, finding Andreth again would have been thought to be impossible as well.

The light in the east began to illuminate the cabin and surrounding woods in the cool damp colors
of morning.

A noise pulled Aegnor's attention and he turned to see two large dark eyes staring at him from the
shadows. Lost in his thoughts he had walked passed the house and now stood next to the small penned in shelter where the horses were stabled. He walked to the fence and smiled.

"Coiva tambë mai?" he said as he leaned against the fence and held out a hand to the tall bay.

The bay for his part simply gave a little huff and sauntered over, leaning his head over the fence to rest it on Aegnor's shoulder.

"Victor savin?" he said with a soft laugh as he scratched the bay under the chin. "Inyë Aikanáro."

A tug at his shoulder turned him slightly to see Andrea's grey mare sticking her nose out for attention. Aegnor laughed.

"Yes, yes, nícenlyë."

The horses watched Aegnor with large bright eyes as he spoke, each giving a little huff with a shake of their head. Aegnor could not be certain as to whether or not his words were understood. But it seemed to him that there was some sort of recognition there.

He had often wondered just how much from the old world remained. While Men had claimed dominion and watered down the events of ages with myths and legends of their own, there were times when Aegnor thought he could catch remnants of the past. Usually in the most isolated areas of the world. There were tribes in the mountains of Mongolia and Siberia that still hunted with eagles. A thing that many of the tribes of Men from the North and the Far East had learned during Aegnor's time in the first age. There were tribes of Men in the Middle East in the mountains of Musandam that carried long handled axes called a jerz. A thing another tribe of Men in Aegnor's time carried, although they were scattered and leaderless when he last walked the land. The tradition of exchanging rings when promised or married was also continued from his peoples. The tradition of Walpurgis Night was an early celebration of Men as well. A ritual to ward off the servants of the dark. Carnistir had mentioned that Balrogs and other fell beasts still roam the land so why not some of the more noble. It could be that the eagles of the Far East were descendants of the Thornhoth, it could also be that there were descendants of Nahar or Rochallor in some of the bloodlines of horses today.

"Mana equeldë meldenya," he said as he patted the great horse's neck, "cenasit caringwë omentië epë?"

The bay said nothing and gave Aegnor a slow blink. Aegnor laughed.

"Ui, citanlá," he chuckled. The horse's ears suddenly flicked up and to the right, brown eyes moving over and past Aegnor's shoulder. Aegnor followed the horse's gaze to see Andrea who suddenly let out a yelp as she turned and bolted through the back door of the cabin.

Andrea awoke to the quiet crackle of the clock radio on the table next to her bed. With a slow stretch she reached over and slapped the snooze button on the top. She lay there, half on her side, half on her stomach, arm hanging over the side of the bed, staring at the window. It was still dark. She rolled back over with another stretch till her arm flopped down on the other side of the bed and she lay on her back staring at the ceiling. She held still and listened for any sound from inside the house and heard nothing.

_He must still be sleeping_, she thought. _Good_.

She kicked off the covers and went into the small attached bathroom for a quick shower.
After leaving Agner on the porch, Andrea had gone into the kitchen briefly to gather what they would need and then made her way to her room. She had already set aside most of the supplies and knew she would wake up a little earlier in the morning for the rest.

Being here with him was not what she had expected. She had thought that by bringing him here and getting out of the city, she could gain some footing again and get him out of his element at the same time.

But instead he seemed to become … intense? No, at peace? Bright maybe? One with the universe? Whatever the hell it was, he was definitely not off balance.

She, on the other hand, seemed to struggle even more. She did not want to be nice to him. Not yet anyway.

She decided to focus instead on the tasks at hand.

After getting out of the shower she slipped on the clothes she had set out the night before. Jeans with a t-shirt and a flannel over shirt. While the temperature was still warm in the afternoon, it could get a little chilly in the early hours of the morning and at night. She would layer accordingly. She pulled her hair back in a loose braid and slipped on her wool socks before heading downstairs. As she exited the room she looked over at Agner's door. It was closed and there was no light from beneath. He was still sleeping. She crept softly past his door and down the stairs. She did not want to wake him just yet. She wanted to get some breakfast started first and then load up the packs while he ate. It was a childish thing to do but she did not feel like being an adult just yet.

She walked into the kitchen and began to pull out a few items from the fridge. Eggs, bacon, butter and bread, the usual breakfast fare. She set the burner on low so it could warm up and began to prepare the eggs. She was not sure of how he preferred his eggs or if he even liked them. She had decided to go with over easy but when she cracked the egg a small piece of shell fell in them and after taking what felt like an eternity to fish it out she ended up with scrambled. With a sigh she moved on to the bacon, laying a few strips carefully down. As they began to sizzle she grabbed the coffee maker and began to prepare a pot when she remembered that she needed to feed the horses as well. She went to the door and slipped on a pair of rubber boots and pulled on a knit hat as she walked outside. It would only take five minutes. She would have them fed and be back in the kitchen in time to finish breakfast.

Andrea walked outside. The sun had not yet peeked over the horizon but she could hear the sharp chirps of thrush and warblers in the trees and knew it would not be long. She walked out to the trailer and grabbed a bucket from the back and walked quickly to around to the back of the cabin. Only to come to a slow stop.

At first it was the surprise of seeing him. A shadowy figure next to the stables, singing softly. She had been sure he was still sleeping. He stood there, no shirt, no shoes, just a pair of jeans, leaning up against the horse pen as he scratched Vic under the chin. And he was singing to him? No wait, not singing. He was speaking, but not English. Something else, something … she did not quite recognize and yet seemed so familiar. The words, his voice seemed to float on the air and wrap around her. Something seemed to flutter around in the back of her mind. Something just out of sight and hiding in the peripheral. A memory? She grasped at it, but it remained just out of reach. Random thoughts suddenly came to her mind. Thoughts of her father, brother and sister. A vague memory of staring at the night sky with her mother. Memories of pouring over old manuscripts, and of campfires in the woods. She could almost smell the fire burning. No, she did smell the fire burning. Something is burning.
Andrea spat out a curse as she spun around and ran through the backdoor and into the kitchen. Black smoke billowed from the room as she ran to the stove. She grabbed a dishtowel and quickly picked up the pan with the eggs and tossed it into the sink and turned on the water. It hissed angrily at Andrea as she turned around and grabbed the other pan with the black charred remains of the bacon and tossed that in the sink as well. Smoke and steam spewed forth from the sink as Andrea fanned the dishrag back and forth. She said a few more choice words under her breath as she began opening windows. A soft clearing of the throat came from the doorway behind her.

"Is there anything …"

His sentence trailed off into silence as he gave her a cautiously questioning look. He stood there, no shirt, no shoes, pants hanging loosely from his waist, his hair a tousled mess atop his head. Andrea thought she could see just a hint of those strange ears of his peeking out of the blonde waves. It was as if Michelangelo's David had decided to hop down from his pedestal and slip on some Levis. Maybe Michelangelo was not the artist to liken him to at the moment though, because when Andrea looked at him her mind went to something more on the Mapplethorpe level. She wanted to punch him in his perfect face and yet jump him all at the same time.

"No," she said, smiling through gritted teeth, "I am fine. I got this."

Andrea made a slow and controlled turn and made to leave the kitchen before realizing that she needed to go the other way. So she stopped again and made a second controlled turn and went to the back door where Agner stood. She marched over, head held high and eyes strictly front. Agner for his part said nothing. He simply stepped to the side so Andrea could pass.

Andrea walked out the door to the back and released the breath she had been holding while simultaneously snatching up the bucket she had discarded earlier. She stomped over to the stables and scooped feed into the bucket that she then poured into Vic's bag.

What was he doing up, she thought angrily. The sun had not yet come up in the horizon and there he was, wide awake and talking to the horses. He probably doesn't even sleep, she thought bitterly. She pushed the thoughts from her mind with a shake of her head. Why was she so bothered by this? So he gets up early? What is the big deal? She scooped up another bucket full of feed and dropped it in to Evy's bag next. This should not bother her but it did.

A nudge and a warm huff of breath from her right snapped her from her sullen reprieve and looked over to see Evy nosing her way into her feed bag. Andrea pursed her lips as she reached up and scratched the grey between the ears.

"Traitor," she whispered with a smirk.

Andrea sighed and headed back towards the cabin. There was no point in standing out here sulking, there was still things that needed to be done. She had packed food up in the necessary containers last night and had prepared the packs and tent but the horses had to be led into the trailer and they still had to check in at the ranger station. The sky was getting lighter by the minute and she wanted to be on the road before the sun was completely up. Breakfast would just have to wait.

Or at least so she thought.

Andrea walked through the back door of the cabin and into the kitchen to find a still shirtless Agner preparing breakfast. The pots had been cleaned and were back on the stove with bacon and eggs sizzling away inside them. He glanced over his shoulder at her and smiled.
"It seemed a shame to let this go to waste," he said as looked back down at the stove top. "I thought I could finish this for you while gathered the rest of what you packed last night in the jeep."

Agner flipped an egg and looked back over at Andrea who stood at the door staring. Agner paused, his head tilting slightly as he gave her a curious and somewhat cautious look.

"Or you could finish and I could pack? Whichever you prefer of course …"

Andrea just stood there for a moment before breaking out into a fit of giggles. She rubbed at her eyes with the palm of her hands before running her fingers through her hair and bringing them to a rest on her shoulders. She shook her head as she looked at the floor and laughed again.

"No," she chuckled with a shake of her head as she walked through the kitchen. "No, it's fine. I just … I … you just … go … whatever. I'm good."

Agner continued to stand very still as he watched Andrea walk across the floor and into the front room as she spoke.

"So I should load the car or finish making breakfast?" he called out after her.

"Yes," was all she shouted back.

It did not take Andrea very long to load the jeep. She had already packed most of what they would need. The food was carefully packed and stored in air tight containers to keep the unwanted scavenger away. She did a quick mental check as she put the bags in. Water purifier and filter, iodine tablets, flashlight, jackknife, water proof matches, whistle and first aid kit, sleeping bags and tent and so on. Once she was satisfied she pulled the jeep around to the back and parked it next to the trailer. She did a quick brush down and checking of hooves before loading Victor and Evy.

When she finally returned to the cabin she found breakfast prepared and Agner dressed, something she was particularly grateful for. Andrea ate everything in front of her. Not just because they would be riding the rest of the day but also because everything was just that good. She decided that since he was such a good cook and since he had cleaned the kitchen not once but twice now, she would let all this perfection slide … this time.

It was a short drive to the DEC station to check in. They would take the horses down the trail to the lake where they would camp the night and then return the next day. The ranger said the weather could not be better for the weekend and that the trail looked good for the horses. They went over the usual rules and regulations for camping and hiking but as Andrea had been here several times in the past the ranger was familiar with her and he moved through things quickly. It was not long before they were back outside, unloading the horses from the trailer.

"We'll leave the trailer and the jeep here," she called out as she urged Evy out of the trailer. "They'll be fine. I may need your help getting Vic out of the trailer. Just gimme a sec …"

Andrea took the lead rope from around Evy's neck and clipped it to the outside of the horse trailer. After she arranged the grey's bit and reins she walked around to find Agner coming out of the back of the trailer, walking alongside Vic with nothing but his hand on the bay's haunches to guide him. Had it been anyone else Andrea would have stood there with her mouth agape, but it was not just anyone else.

"Let me guess, you are an experienced horseman too," she inquired without really asking.

"It has been some time," Agner replied, "not since my youth. But yes, I have had some experience with horses."
"Of course you have," she muttered.

She walked over and tied Victor to the trailer next to Evy with the lead rope and began checking the reigns and saddle. Agner looked at the bit in the bay's mouth with disdain.

"Is this," he said with a finger flicking at the straps to the bit, "really necessary?"

Andrea looked at him with curious amusement. "I suppose you have a better way? Vic is a good boy, you can tell him where to go with a nudge of your feet and not as much rein. But he has been known to get away from his rider from time to time so I would I think it might be advisable to keep it on."

It seemed to Andrea that Agner paused a moment and stared at Vic. Vic for his part simply nudged Agner and shook his head. This must have resolved whatever internal debate had been being waged in Agner's mind because he turned and began to set the saddle and blanket on Vic's back.

"Whatever you think is best, of course," was all he said.

They were able to saddle up and set supplies relatively quickly much to Andrea's pleasure, and after a quick once over of both horses they mounted up and head out. It seemed to Andrea that they could not have picked a better day. The sky was blue, the air was crisp and the sun was beginning to shine brighter by the minute. It was the type of beautiful day that could feed one's soul forever. The trail was wide and lined with ferns and the first of the falling leaves. The birch and maple trees were in abundance although there were quite a few pine and hemlock and the occasional spruce that dotted the trail as well. The trail widened enough at times for Agner to ride up alongside of her and it seemed to Andrea that he and Vic had become the best of friends. This did not irritate Andrea as his other accomplishments did though. She was too happy at the moment. She had been waiting for this weekend for what seemed an eternity. Evy must have been able to pick up on her excitement because she would jump at the bit and try to break out into a run but Andrea kept a tight hold on the reins.

"She is ready to go," Agner commented with a smile. "You handle her well."

"She is just picking up on me," Andrea grinned back, "it's not her fault. She can read me too well."

"Yes, she can."

"You sound so certain," Andrea laughed and cocked an eyebrow. "I suppose she told you as much?"

"Actually Vic did," Agner replied with a pat to the bay's neck.

"Oh, well naturally."

Andrea gave Agner a little sideways smirk while simultaneously giving Evy a little kick and letting up on the rein. That was all the impetus the grey needed as she bounded to the lead. Andrea allowed her to go no more than a swift cantor, not wanting to break out into a full gallop for fear of the grey injuring herself with the amount of equipment they carried. She could hear Vic's gait behind her and grinned again.

It was not much longer before they reached the campsite. Andrea set about unloading the packs and setting a bear hang for the food while Agner busied himself with the tents and preparing the designated fire pit area. Andrea came here every year. It was a good size clearing that opened up to the lake where one could sit on a large rock face and look out onto the water. The small fire pit that she used was still there. There were good branches to hang supplies and food from to keep away
from the random critter that would range through, but open enough so that no random widow makers could rain down on the tents.

Andrea finished with storing the food supplies she attached the lead ropes around Victor and Evy's necks so she could set out feed bags and begin to remove the saddles. Agner moved silently up beside her and began to remove Vic's harness with unmasked disdain. Andrea laughed.

"He was good for you today but you better be careful. You give him too much rein and he will run all over you."

Agner laughed as she spoke.

"Andrea you have no trust," he called over his shoulder as he removed the saddle from Vic's back and set it down.

"Oh you're going to speak to me about trust are you," she snorted. "I suppose you are right though," she sighed loudly. "I mean it's not like they ever blew me off or anything."

Agner paused brushing Vic mid stroke and winced. "I promise you Andrea, I was not blowing you off. I become … distracted …"

"Distracted … for three days. One hell of a distraction," Andrea mused.

Agner resumed brushing. "It is the truth Andrea."

"It is still a shitty thing to do Agner," Andrea said, straightening up from where she stood hunched over as she scraped Evy's hooves clean. She tossed the hoof pick to Agner and walked over towards the fire pit. She had walked over intending to set up the small grate that was left here year round for cookouts, only to find that the fire pit had been set up. And it was set up in a far more sophisticated manner than she had ever done. Instead of the teepee style that Andrea was accustomed to, this one was flat and long, the kindling had been set to be higher on one end and was already burning. Andrea turned around to look at Agner, who had finished cleaning Vic's hooves and was now digging through his pack.

"Did you do this?"

Agner looked up from his pack. "Ah yes, I went ahead and got it burning. This way the kindling can become coals for cooking. That is why there is an incline," he said as he began to unwind a spool of fishing line and cutting it with a hunting knife from his pack, "this way I can cook at different levels of heat if need be."

Andrea watched as Agner pick up a long thin branch from the ground and tie the pieces of fishing line to it. He then pulled out a small box and carefully removed the hooks that he then placed at the end of the each line with a small piece of bait.

"Where did you get that?" she asked.

"At the last stop we made before the cabin I believe. They had a little bait shop in the gas station. I thought fish would be nice."

Agner walked to the edge of the rock face and secured the branch over the water.

"So what, you're some kind of survivalist or ex-marine right?"

Agner brushed his hands off on his pants as he stood up and walked over to where she stood.
"More like the Foreign Legion actually."

Andrea laughed. "Where did you put the matches?"

"Matches?"

"Yes the matches you used to start the fire." When Agner did not answer Andrea shook her head. "You didn't use matches did you," she asked.

Agner grimaced and gave her a guilty look.

"Of course you didn't," she muttered with a sideways smile.

By the time they had camp set and in place and had settled down themselves the sun was low on the horizon. The fishing line that Aegnor had laid out bore fruit, catching a nice smallmouth bass that he happily prepared. It seemed to him that Andrea had enjoyed the meal wholeheartedly, which had pleased him to no end. He looked at her from across the fire. The anger she had felt towards him in the beginning seemed to have lessened significantly, something else that please him.

After they had finished eating and putting everything away again, they sat back next to the fire. The sun was dipping below the mountains and the lake had taken on the same golden hue as the sky, casting the light like jewels across the water. Andrea sat across the fire from him with her legs crossed beneath her as he leaned back against his saddle, legs stretched out before him and his fingers laced across his chest. It had been some time since he found himself in such surroundings. There was a sense of contentment, a sense of peace that seemed to come over his being. He could not put to memory the last time he had felt this way and he chided himself for not doing this sooner. While he did enjoy the life that bustled through the cities, the influx of thoughts and energies that seemed to ebb and flow like the tide, there was something almost mystical about the wilderness. There was a stillness that masked its own undercurrent of activity. He could feel himself becoming one with the land, something that was important for his kind to maintain if they wished to thrive.

He looked once more over at Andrea, who was now leaning back against her elbows, her legs stretched out with one foot crossed over the other as she looked at the fire. Her hair hung loose and fell about her shoulders in long dark waves onto the ground. How lovely she looked to him in this dimming light, the fire casting her in a soft golden glow. How beautiful she looked. How like Andreth she was.

Aegnor looked away. He had to stop thinking of her in this manner. Even if she were somehow Andreth reborn, he had to see her as she was now, not as who she was then.

Movement from across the fire caught his attention. He looked to see Andrea walking over to where he lay and sit down next to him.

"So," she said with a sweeping gesture towards the fire, "where did you learn to do all this?"

"I spent much of my youth with my brothers and cousins … camping," he said with a smile. "I suppose you could say we learned together."

"Was your whole family the outdoorsy type?"

"Yes … and no. Some more so than others."
"Let me guess …," she paused, giving him a playful look, "big game hunters right?"

An image flashed through Aegnor's mind of he and his brothers tracking and riding down a pack of goblins, killing every one of them, the blood running thick and black upon the ground.

"More or less," he replied.

Andrea paused again, her playful look becoming thoughtful. "You don't like talking about them do you. About your family."

"What? No on the contrary I rather enjoy the memories. Especially the pleasant ones.

"And the unpleasant ones?"

"Two sides to every coin," he shrugged. "They have their purpose as well."

Aegnor watched as Andrea broke pieces off a twig she had picked up from the ground.

"Can I ask you something?" she finally said.

"Of course."

"It's kind of personal …"

"Ask."

"You told me once that you couldn't go home. Why not?"

"It is … complicated," he let out a weary sigh followed by a soft bitter little laugh. "My father … he tried to tell me. He knew, he understood what was at stake, what the cost would be. But I was young and foolish. I thought I knew better. By the time I had realized I was wrong it was too late. Tale as old as time. Wise, learned father. Stubborn, willful son." Aegnor brought his hands up to cradle the back of his head as he leaned back to look up at the sky. "Still, it is a harsh lesson, losing everything you love."

He listened as Andrea snapped more pieces off of the twig, tossing them into the fire.

"So … it was only family you left behind?"

Aegnor looked at her curiously.

"I mean, was there … anyone else that you wish you could see …"

Aegnor still looked at her.

"… other than family …"

Was she trying to get a something? His brow furrowed as he his head tilted to the side in confusion.

"A girl dummy! I am asking if you left behind a girl," she said exasperated.

Aegnor started in surprise. "Oh! Yes, of course! I mean no. I mean I understand the question and no there was, is no girl waiting. Not at home, no," he sputtered clumsily.

Andrea watched him as he stumbled through his response. "I'm sorry. I'm being nosey now. You don't have to talk about it."
"No, it is fine. I just … I am …" Aegnor laughed sadly in frustration. "There was a girl … once but that was a long time ago. It did not … it was not meant to be."

"What happened?"

Memories flooded Aegnor's mind. Long dark hair that fell about small delicate shoulders. Large, bright, inquisitive eyes that pierced his soul … no not his soul, his fëa. He could smell her skin, he could taste her tears. The old world seemed to be resurging. It seemed as if it moved dizzily around him. He struggled to pull his mind back to the present. It was dangerous to lose oneself in such a way. He looked over at Andrea as he focused.

"She died."

Andrea's eyes had gone wide and the look on her face was one of regret.

"Oh Agner, I am so sorry. I had no idea. I didn't mean to …"

Aegnor gave her his best attempt at a reassuring smile. He did not wish for her to feel pity for him. Not over this. Nor did he want her to regret her question. She had right to know.

"You could not know. It is fine, I am fine," he lied. "It was a long time ago Andrea."

She turned back to the fire and they sat in silence for a moment. The sky had gone dark by now and stars riddled the sky, covering every inch of the dark blanket of night above them.

"Have you ever seen so many," she asked, "so many stars in one place in the sky?"

Aegnor smiled. "It was been a long time. Too long to be honest."

"When I was a kid, my father would tell me that whenever someone died, another star would be added to the sky. I used to stay up all night trying to find my mother's. Stupid, I know."

"No, not at all."

They sat staring up at the sky for a moment longer before Andrea jumped up suddenly and began to rummage through her bag. After finding what she was looking for she walked back over to where he lay and held out her hand.

"Come on," she smiled, "I want to show you something."

Aegnor took her hand as he pulled himself up from the ground. Andrea clicked on the flashlight she had pulled from her bag and led him away from the fire, towards the rock face that sat out over the water. His eyes never left her as she took him to the edge and clicked off the flashlight. Inky, black darkness surrounded them.

"Just give your eyes a second to adjust," she said as she squeezed his hand.

Normally he would have had a little internal chuckle at that comment. His eyes had become sharper once more upon leaving the city. He could see for miles if he wished. There were no artificial lights here to confuse his depth perception or throw off his range. But he could not appreciate the irony of the comment at the moment. When Andrea had turned off her flashlight he had followed her gaze out over the water, and his breath had caught.

The water, which the setting sun had covered with blindingly bright reflection, gone still and now mirrored the night sky. Gone were the glaring jewels of sunset, instead replaced by the millions of
tiny pure white diamonds that spread out over the water. The sliver of moon shone above the mountains in the water as clear as crystal. It was impossible to tell where the sky stopped and the water began. Tiny blinking lights dotted the shores and danced around where they stood. Somewhere in the back of Aegnor's mind he knew they were fireflies but could not shake the feeling that Varda herself were hallowing the very ground they stood on. He was spinning again. He had to find his footing. He heard Andrea's voice from somewhere beside him.

"When I was younger, my mother would tell me stories of an Indian princess who stole a brave's heart with her reflection in the water. I have always loved that story. I guess that some would think it was silly but when I come here, when I stand here and look out onto the water I would think it would be almost impossible not to fall in love with someone here."

Aegnor's heart drummed loudly in his chest. His mind teetered back and forth between the present and the past. He no longer had any sense of time. His gaze moved along the edge of the water.

"I would think it completely impossible not to …" His voice sounded heavy and thick to his ears.

"Do you?" Andrea said softly. "Do you truly believe it to be impossible?"

"Yes," he rasped as his gaze found hers in the reflection of the water, "yes, truly I do."

Aegnor would have no memory of who had moved toward whom first, although Andrea would often argue that he had taken her into his arms before she even had a chance to protest, not that she had planned too.

What he did remember was that somehow they had ended up on without a care upon the hard, cool ground with nothing but rapidly discarded clothes as a blanket. He could not think. He was driven purely by need.

This was her. This was his Andreth. She had come back to him, found him. She had saved him.

He would not lose her again. Not now, not ever.

Hands moved over bodies as his mouth greedily tasted every part of her. His lips pressed against her mouth, her neck, her chest, and down her stomach. He was drunk with her, and yet uncertain of what to do while wanting to do everything. She pulled him back up to her mouth as her hands guided his in pulling off her pants. And then deft little fingers wrested him out of his. His heart was pounding in his ears and his body ached as her hands slid down his back to guide him in.

Aegnor stopped, his heart that pounded so fiercely with desire now drummed in fear. She does not know. She does not understand. To take her this way, in this manner, without her knowledge would be the greatest of sins.

"Wait," he gasped, "wait! I must tell –"

Aegnor stopped speaking as his world quickly began to spin till he found himself on his back and Andrea stared down at him.

"No," she whispered as she kissed him gently, "no. Not this time. I won't let you push me away this time. I won't let you run away again."

Aegnor gasped again as he felt her come down atop him, her warmth enveloping him. He looked into her eyes and he could see it, a light that called to him, that pulled at his fëa.

He knew this was wrong. That he should stop, he could still save her. But as he looked up at her,
the stars framing her face and in her hair, her soul crying out with such joy, engulfing him with so much love that he could not resist. And so he gave himself completely, and wrapped his fëa with hers till they were one.

After they had spent themselves, they remained upon the ground, naked beneath sky, an offering to the One. Aegnor held Andrea in his arms, looking down at her sleeping face.

*Andrea. Andreth. With the One as my witness I will forever love you and no other.*

Andrea stirred in her sleep and gave a soft smile as she nuzzled against him.

"I love you too," she whispered.
Chapter 15

"You are missing quite the feast … but I suppose you are already aware of that. It's not like you to miss a feast. Nor is it like you ignore me … well, I mean you do ignore me but usually not quite so blatantly."

"I am not in a festive mood."

"Yes I noticed."

"Forgive me."

"Forgiven. Do you care to join us at all?"

"No."

"Not even for –"

"No. I … please, I prefer my chambers at the moment. I would not be much in the way of company."

"So I can see."

Aegnor turned and looked at his brother who lifted his hands as if in surrender. Finrod moved to the opposite side of the window seat where Aegnor sat and set himself down. He gazed out at the festivities below. The sounds of music and laughter floated along the air.

"A simple observation," he protested innocently. "One that many others have made as well I am sure."

Aegnor's eyes flicked away from the window and down towards his feet.

"I know …, again forgive me," he sighed, "I know."

He sat down across from his brother and grabbed the other goblet of wine but did not drink, just swirled the contents absently.

Finrod studied his brother. His brow furrowed, his eyes stared intently down at the cup in his hands. But he knew that it was not the wine that held his attention so acutely.

"You love her yes?"

Aegnor's head snapped up and he looked at Finrod.

"What? Who are … I do not –"

"Andreth," Finrod interrupted, "I am talking about Andreth. You love her, yes?"

Aegnor looked at his brother with open surprise.

"Oh do not look so shocked," Finrod sniffed dismissively. "Despite what you and Angrod may believe, I am not completely oblivious." Finrod adjusted his robes with a slight indignant air as he spoke. Once all was arranged to his satisfaction he turned his gaze back to his brother who had returned his own gaze back to his cup. "Yes. I feel it is safe to assume that you do."
Aegnor sighed once more and leaned back in his seat. "I suppose you will assume whatever you wish to assume so, please, by all means, assume away."

"Oh do not be a petulant child Aegnor. Is this what has been troubling you so? Your feelings for this girl?"

"This does not concern you," Aegnor answered softly. Finrod did not mistake the caution in his brother's tone.

"Of course it concerns me," Finrod said undeterred. "You are my brother. Anything that happens to you concerns me. Especially when it turns you into such a foul little mood. Have you told her of your feelings for her?"

"No."

"Do you plan to?"

"No."

"Hmm," Finrod remarked.

Aegnor said nothing as he returned to swirling his cup and staring out the window.

"She is quite fond of you," Finrod continued.

Still, Aegnor said nothing as the wine spun swiftly in the cup.

"I imagine it would bring her great joy to know you feel the same."

The wine stopped swirling as the cup went still. Aegnor set the cup down on the small table next to him and sat back in his seat. He rested his hands across his chest as he reclined, fingers laced together. He seemed to consider Finrod for a moment before speaking.

"Yes, I am sure she would. She would feel great joy and even greater joy to know that I would bind myself to her. That I would swear before Eru Iluvatar to forsake all others and pledge myself for all of eternity, till the end of Arda, the end of time, and beyond."

"But then we would not have the end of time, would we."

It was Finrod's turn now to sit silent, suddenly sick at heart.

"Because time will not stop for her as it will for us. There is no eternity for Andreth. Time will not end for her. Instead, she will end in time. Her days are marked. She will age, growing old and feeble, unable to do so many simple tasks that one takes for granted in youth."

"You fear death," Finrod mused.

"No," said vehemently, "I mean yes, of course I fear death. I fear her death. To love someone some completely, knowing there can be no other, and then knowing that she will be taken from me regardless of what I do. It rends at my heart. I know I would fade, and would gladly go rather than linger aimlessly on without her. But that is not what stops me from binding myself to her. That is not why I would deny myself and her."

Aegnor stopped once more and looked down at his hands.

"The race of Men are proud brother," Aegnor said wistfully. "And Andreth is no different. She is beautiful, she is brilliant, and she is proud. She will not understand that I will not care that she
ages. That I will remain by her side throughout it all, never seeing her as the old crone that she will believe she has become. She will never understand that I will only ever see the beautiful being I first saw in the reflection of the Tarn Aeluin, stars in her hair. Instead she will feel the shame of her weakness and anger at the inevitability of her own end. I would save her from that pain and pray that she will live her life fully. But if I cannot wed her, then I shall wed no one."

Finrod leaned forward and rested his elbows on his knees as he considered his brother. He looked down at his cup and found himself swirling his own wine absently. He could feel Aegnor's eyes on him.

"Would it not be worthwhile though," he said slowly, "would not the joy, however brief, be worth it? It is no small matter, what you speak of. You will carry this choice in your fea for all of time, there will be no other."

Aegnor mouth curved into a small melancholy little smile.

"Do not think I have not thought of that, simply carrying her away. Far from danger and war and strife. Keeping her safe for however many days would be gifted to use. To live in blissful ignorance of the horrors in this world, breaking with all tradition."

Finrod sat up straight in his chair as a sudden realization came over him.

"You are not staying due to some arcane rule of not wedding due to war? Please Aegnor, I would not see you do this to yourself. It is a new world brother, no one would fault you if you were to wed."

Aegnor shook his head and laughed softly. Finrod thought it sounded empty and bitter.

"I wish it were that simple brother, truly I do." Aegnor looked at Finrod, his voice was fateful. "There is … something watches, from the darkness. I cannot see it but its malignance ever moving, spreading, like a disease. There is something coming Finrod, I can feel it. My heart's desire is to take Andreth from here far from this danger, but that would mean I would have to leave Angrod, leave our people. To leave now, to abandon my family, to abandon our people, when something so malevolent waits would be unforgiveable. Because when it comes, and it will … I know I will not be here long after."

"Aegnor, have you seen something? Have the Valar come to you with the foresight?"

"No, no," Aegnor shook his head. "I have seen nothing. But I know something is coming. To turn away from this would negate all that we sacrificed to get here. And we came here to defeat the evil of Morgoth. To enact justice."

Finrod did not protest. His brother had set his mind and would not turn. He knew him well enough to know that. But he could not help but wonder if perhaps the true reason why his brother came to this land was to meet an Atani woman.

Andrea stood beneath the shower, the warm water soaking her skin and hair, and grinned stupidly. They had returned to the cabin the following day. Much earlier than she would have liked, but a surprise cold front had come in and while she had assured Agner that they would be fine, he seemed concerned and mumbled about how a cold could easily become pneumonia. Andrea would have just laughed this off as some sort of unfounded paranoia and weird "Agner knows best"
attitude that he could sometimes have, but somehow she knew that he was genuinely concerned for
her health. She could not help but feel the need to ease his concerns. Especially since last night ….

And that morning ….

Andrea's grin became even wider.

Even she had been surprised at her boldness. One could argue that she practically forced herself on
him. But she was not going to deal with his running away any longer. She had laid her feelings out
upon the proverbial table and wanted, no, demanded an answer. She was not disappointed.

The way he had stared at her, his eyes locked onto hers. And for a moment she thought she could see
herself within them. That she could see into his very soul.

She wondered if this was what it was like to be in love.

And she did love him.

Andrea's grin split her face in half.

She had fallen asleep in his arms and, for the first time she could remember, had a restful
dreamless sleep.

When she awoke he was still holding her. She had looked up to see those bright peculiar eyes of his
staring down at her and before she had even realized what she was doing, she reached up and
pulled his head down till her mouth touched his as she situated herself beneath him and … well,
this time things were not as rushed as before.

Andrea actually giggled.

*Pull yourself together,* she chided halfheartedly.

Andrea stepped out of the shower and took the towel that hung from the wall and wrapped it
around her. She opened the door to the bathroom and peeked out into the hallway. She could hear
the sounds from the kitchen and the aroma of cooking meat wafted up the stairs. Her stomach
growled involuntarily. He was cooking again. She supposed it was a good thing since the kitchen
was not one of her strengths.

For a moment she felt an almost uncontrollable urge to go downstairs and wrap herself around him.
A wave of warmth enveloped her and she felt her cheeks go hot. It felt as if something was actually
pulling at her.

*What is wrong with me,* she thought angrily. *You would think I'd never done this before.*

But then she had not. Not like this any way. There had only ever been with two people in her life
and only one of them would have had anything close to some sort of meaning. A boyfriend she had
known since high school. And when she had finally given in to his many attempts the result had left her feeling rather let down by the whole experience. A rushed, uncomfortable, awkward
experience that always seemed to consist of her waiting for him to get done. But then, she had
never been with anyone else and so assumed that was how it was supposed to be. And yet, even
though the physical relationship had never been something she had connected with, she could not
help but feel her world had been shattered when she heard he had moved on without delay once
they both arrived at their respected colleges. She had wallowed in self-pity for quite some time
after that until, after a night of heavy drinking with Katherine, she went home with a young
aspiring lawyer she met at a bar. One thing led to another and she found herself once again doing
something she had no real interest in. She practically ran out of the apartment after, and once she got home she sat in the showered and cried. After that she swore off sex till she felt she was ready. Till she decided she truly wanted it.

Needless to say quite some time had passed up to now.

Andrea was glad she waited.

She gathered her wits together and turned away from the stairs and went to the bedroom to grab her clothes. After she had dressed she bounded down the stairs, but hesitated before going into the kitchen. While they had unhitched the trailer and set Evy and Vic in the pen, she had not yet fed them. She could not leave her babies hungry while she sat and ate. She made for her boots and sat down to put them on when a voice called from the kitchen.

"Your babies are fine."

"Excuse me?" Andrea said looking up.

Agner stood leaning against the entrance to the kitchen, wiping his hands on a dishtowel, a little smile across his face.

"Victor and Evy," he replied, "they are fine. They are fed and sheltered and quite content. I have already take care of that for you."

Andrea set her boots back down and leaned back in her chair, her arms across her chest.

"Are you reading my mind?" she said with a grin.

Agner stopped wiping at his hands and stared at Andrea for a moment before looking down at the towel once more.

"Well," he shrugged, "you are a bit of an open book."

Andrea laughed. "Oh really," she said as walked over until she stood pressed lightly against him and wrapped her arms loosely around his neck, her chin resting on his chest as she stared up at him. "So tell me then, what am I thinking right now?"

The corners of Agner's mouth curled into a small smile as he tossed the towel across the room onto the kitchen table. His hands moved around her waist and moved slowly down till they stopped right at the top of her thighs. Andrea gave a squeak as he suddenly picked her up, her legs wrapped around his waist and he now looked up at her as he held her.

"Putting such thoughts into words would make me blush," he grinned as he turned around and began to carry her up the stairs.

Andrea laugh and buried her face into his neck as he carried her into the bed room.

Yes, Andrea was very glad she waited.

Once they were able to keep themselves from distraction, they loaded the horses in the trailer and set out on their way. It did not take long before they reached the Gadsden's and set Vic and Evy in the stables. The lithe little grey pranced off happily into the fields, but Vic hesitated and looked at Agner at the gate. Agner scratched the space between the bay's eyes and then Vic gave a little snort as he finally sauntered off towards the direction Evy took off in.
"It seems you made a friend," Andrea commented as she locked the gate.

Agner shrugged. "I hope to see him again soon."

"So far, the odds of that happening are pretty good," Andrea said as she took him by the hand.

"So far?" Agner raised an eyebrow.

"So far," she affirmed with a sideways smile.

Carolyn had implored them to stay, for some lunch at least, but Andrea regretfully declined. It was a long drive back to the city and they were already leaving later than she had wanted as it was. She still had to get up and go to class in the morning. And so, after many apologies, farewells, and promises to come back again soon they were finally off.

The return trip was not nearly as painful as the trip up, what with the mood being decidedly better. Andrea found herself becoming very sleepy only a couple of hours in and reluctantly agreed to let Agner drive. She felt horrible that he had to, seeing as he had probably not had much more sleep than her and was more than likely tired himself. But he insisted he was fine and so she relented, laid the seat back and dozed off. When she woke, the sky was already dark and they were not but a couple of hours from the city. Agner had said he was fine to drive the rest of the way but now it was her turn to insist and he pulled over so she could drive the rest of the way in. He did not show it but Andrea knew he had to be tired. He just had to be. She felt horrible at how long she had slept, leaving the bulk of the trip for him to navigate and could not help feeling relieved when he leaned back in the seat and closed his eyes. She did not wake him until they reached his apartment.

She pulled the jeep into an open spot as close as she could get near his apartment and turned to wake Agner. They only had to trudge for about a block with their bags on their backs before reaching the brownstone door. As they loaded into the elevator, Agner insisted Andrea stay the night.

"I really think you should stay, it is late and you have been driving for a while and I wish to be safe. I would be happy to take you in the morning if you did not wish to take a cab or train."

"I have classes in the morning," she said as she stepped into the elevator, "and I can't afford the parking over here."

"You can have my parking," Agner persisted as he followed behind her and used the key for his floor, "it would not be a problem for me to move my vehicle. There really is no reason why you could not stay."

"Yes, I could stay," she agreed, "but the real question is should I stay, don't you think?"

"What do you mean?"

"Well, I have to get up pretty early …"

"I know."

"Even earlier since I wouldn't be at home …"

"That is not a problem."

"So it's pretty important that I get some sleep."
"I would not keep you up."

The elevator pinged and the doors slid open as Andrea walked through. She set her things down as she entered the dark apartment.

"So then it really is just my safety you are thinking of."

Agner walked into the room behind her, his look of confusion slowing turning into one of realization.

"Andrea," he said with a shake of his head, "that is not …"

She turned around to give him a mischievous grin and was stopped by what she saw. Aegnor stood before her still as stone, staring past her in the dark. His eyes, which just seconds earlier had held a gentle warmth as he looked at her, were now black and seemed to burn from within. And all though he never said a word, she knew he was furious.

Andrea took a step back and looked at him curiously. She had no idea what could have made him so angry. Was it something she had said? She had barely opened her mouth to ask him when he spoke.

"What are you doing here …" Aegnor's voice was so low that she could barely make it out.

She turned to follow where his gaze fell. Across the room, wrapped up in the shadows, sat a man. At least she thought it was a man. All she could see of him were two legs that stretched out from the darkness, feet resting on the small table, one big black boot crossed over the other.

Andrea gave out a little yelp and made an involuntary jump backwards, causing her to trip over the bags she had just set down and fall into Aegnor who caught her without seeming to move, his eyes never leaving the figure in the corner.

Andrea realized that, while her heart pounded in her chest, Aegner seemed completely unfazed by the intruder. It even seemed to Andrea that she could detect a tone of familiarity in his voice, a hostile familiarity, but familiar none the less. He was furious but not afraid. Agner knew this person.

She looked back over at the shadow in the corner. How Agner could even tell who this person is was beyond her. She, for her part could see nothing of the man other than his feet. Although, she did catch a glimpse of what she thought were the man's eyes, shining with a pale light that seemed to come from within, reflecting the light when there was none. Similar to a predator.

Just like Agner's.

Andrea looked back at Agner and was about to open her mouth to speak once more when the shadow moved. In one fluid movement the figure rose from the chair as a hand reached out and flicked on the lamp next to it.

"Really now Aegnor, is that any way to greet family?"

Andrea thought she may have caused whiplash from how quickly her head snapped around to look at the man, her mouth dropping open. She squinted as her eyes adjusted to the light and looked at the man before them. He was lean and stood almost as tall as Agner. His eyes were the same color as Agner's as well as a similar shape to the nose and brow, but beyond that the resemblance seemed to stop. His dark hair seemed to stand in stark contrast to the paleness of his skin, giving him a somewhat other worldly beauty. And Andrea had to admit, he was quite beautiful.
The man's gaze fell upon hers and a wide smile spread across his face. She thought she felt Agner grip her a bit more firmly.

"And you must be Andrea," he exclaimed as he swept across the room to where she stood and took her hand, bringing it to his lips. "I am Cirian."

His beautiful Cheshire grin and sharp eyes loomed over her as he kissed her hand. For a moment Andrea found herself unable to speak, trapped by the intensity of his gaze. It was as if he were actually trying to look into her ... head? Her soul? Andrea could not say, but it seemed as if he were looking for something. But as quickly as his eyes seemed to burn into hers, they were gone and he turned his grin on Agner, wide and mischievous.

"Oh you devil ..."

Agner said nothing, only stared at Cirian. His face was once more unreadable, expressionless, the picture of serenity, and yet Andrea knew he was seething. How she knew, she could not say, but she did. But if Cirian noticed he gave no indication. Not that Andrea thought he would care even if he did notice. He simply stared right back at Agner with that cheeky grin. They stood like that for several seconds in what seemed like some silent, unspoken conversation until Andrea spoke up.

"Wait ... family?"

Cirian and Agner both turned and looked at her as if they had forgotten she was even there. Cirian's smile widened, something Andrea had not believed possible.

"Yes, my darling," he purred, "cousins."

At this point, Andrea did not even to attempt to hide her shock. Agner swiftly moved around her and grabbed his cousin, pulling him towards the elevator they had just come from.

"Andrea would you excuse us for a moment."

Before she could even make an attempt to answer they were across the room, speaking in low voices and in a language Andrea could not make out.

She watched them and thought that there were some similarities in their build and how they stood. Andrea could see a familial resemblance in their profiles as well, although the cousin, Cirian was it? Cirian seemed to have a slightly more aquiline look to his. Andrea could not help but wonder if they had the same ears.

And then there was the language that passed in hushed whispers between them. It was the same strange language she had heard him speak while at the cabin. Strange. Musical. And always familiar.

As she stared at the two of them, it seemed as if the world around her began to darken, while they seemed to become brighter even though they stood in shadow.

*I have seen this before,* she thought. *I have heard this language before.*

She looked at Agner and his cousin, their faces taking on an otherworldly quality. But Agner burned brighter, a flame in a dark room. Her world shifted and spiraled wildly as a single thought blazed through her mind.

*He will break your heart.*
Agner's eyes went wide as his head whipped around to her. His normally serene expression replaced with one of pain.

"No," he whispered.

Andrea squeezed her eyes shut and willed her mind to be still but it lurched and fluttered like a moth trapped against the window.

**Why would you love me, and yet set this gulf between us?**

She could hear voices around her but they sounded muffled and far off, as if she were underwater. She struggled to focus, grasping for something solid. She heard the voices again. One of the voices was familiar. She knew that voice. She has known that voice her whole life. The voices broke through the fog in her mind.

"Andreth," the first called urgently.

"That is not her name you fool," the second voice hissed. "Gods Aikanaro, you really screwed the proverbial pooch on this one."

"Will you just go."

"I am only trying to help. She will be fine, I however, will need an answer soon. You know how to reach me."

Andrea's head felt as if were ringing. She felt as if she were being lifted up and carried.

"Agner?"

"Shhh," came the reply.

"What happened?"

"You became dizzy, you fainted."

"Fainted?"

"It is no surprise really, you are exhausted. You hardly ate on the trip back. You need to rest."

Andrea wanted to protest but her head was pounding, a dull throbbing pain behind her eyes. Sleep did sound good. But she had classes in the morning. She needed to go, she needed her things from her apartment.

"No you do not," said Agner. "Everything you need for your class, I will take care of. Just rest."

Had she spoken out loud? She must be feeling ill if she could not even remember speaking. Maybe he was right. She could always wake up early enough to stop by her apartment to get her books. She may be able to get in contact with Kate in time for her to bring them by the class room. Either way she decided she would worry about it in the morning. The heaviness of sleep was on her and she did not feel like fighting it. Agner was right, sleep was what she needed now. Just sleep.

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Aegnor looked back once more at Andrea as she slept soundly in his bed. Her rest was peaceful, at least it was now anyway. It had not started that way.
She had been almost delirious in her mumbling, her conscious flitting between the past and the present. Her mind was becoming muddled and confused as the lines of reality became blurred. He could feel it as if it were happening to him and perhaps, in a way, it was. He could see her dreams as vividly as if they were his own. She dreamt of fire and pain, of tears and sorrow.

It had torn Aegnor apart.

And so he touched the bond to settle her mind. Pushing away the memories of her pain and focusing on the weekend they had recently shared. The feel of mouths against skin, the burn and pull of muscle. Images of riding hard through the woods and joy of that moment. The turmoil of her mind began to relent and he could feel her finally begin to fall into deep sleep.

It was shameful, entering her mind in this way, manipulating her thoughts. To do such things to one unawares was a disgrace. But it had been necessary in this instance.

This was a lie of course. A vain and selfish effort to ease his guilt.

He moved quietly through the dark rooms. He had sat up through the night and washed some of her clothing for the morning. He hoped that her class would be casual tomorrow as all she had were the jeans and shirts selected for hiking. But they would be clean at least. He clicked on the coffee maker. She would be waking up soon and he wanted her to have her comforts. Especially since he would not be there when she woke. He grabbed his keys and stepped into the elevator.

He walked out onto the steps of the brownstone and into the dim morning light. He looked up to the windows of his bedroom. If he listened carefully he could hear her breathing, the soft slow inhale and gentle sigh of release. He pushed down the urge to return to that bed and wake her in a way that would be far more satisfying than coffee ever could. The memory of that night played again in his mind.

The softness of her skin contradicted the heat that came from her person. Indeed, Aegnor had felt as if he were playing with fire as he stumbled clumsily around with her that night. He had felt the fool on several occasions as his hands fumbled and shook like some nervous child. Perhaps he should have been concerned at how easily she had taken control. But then her legs had wrapped around him and any and all coherent thought fled rather quickly. It had already been difficult to keep himself from her prior to this, now it was impossible. She was glorious, and when he looked into her eyes he could see his own light entwined with hers within. The bond they now shared only emphasized that. But then, the bond emphasized many things, something he used it to his advantage that following morning and again later that day.

But that was not all that came through.

Her thoughts and emotions came at him relentlessly, sometimes so loud it was as if she were speaking. She did not have the skills or knowledge to mask them, and so they would wash over him in waves. Even Aegnor found himself struggling to navigate. She was able to pick up on his feelings as well, although she did not realize it. He had to be careful. It was not fair to Andrea to have such an intimate awareness of her thoughts and feelings without her knowledge. And it was not fair for her to carry the additional burden of his own emotions along with her own. It was something Aegnor would have to remedy and remedy soon.

He knew he should not have done what he did. He should have stopped it from going any further. Told her everything no matter how insane it would sound. To take another in such a way was a sacrilege, a sin against the purity of the bond. He would pay a price of course. And rightfully so.

But it had been worth it.
It had been a beautiful weekend. Almost perfect. Almost.

Aegnor walked swiftly down the sidewalk, deftly weaving through the early morning crowd starting their commute. In truth it was not that difficult for Aegnor to make his way. Anyone who was coming towards him would simply take one look at the black cloud of anger that was his face and moved quickly in the opposite direction. The wrath of the Eldar had always been a frightful thing to behold.

And he was furious.

He was angry at many things in truth, but since he was not yet ready to face his own faults, it seemed easier to simply blame his cousin. Carnistir. That bastard.

He had been distracted. He was so focused on Andrea, on her staying with him that evening, that he never even picked up on Carnistir's presence. He never even noticed him until he looked past Andrea and into the dark living room and saw him reclining in the large chair, his legs stretched out and his boots on the table. Aegnor had not been able to hide his surprise, something that had pleased Carnistir to no end. He had simply sat there, in Aegnor's chair with that lazy satisfied smile of his, something that had infuriated Aegnor to no end.

Oh he was furious.

A white ball of rage bloomed in his chest as the blood rushed up his neck and into his face, causing it to burn. Had Andrea not been standing between them he would have grabbed Carnistir by his throat and thrown him from the building himself. But Andrea had been standing between them, and so he contained his anger as best he could. But then Carnistir's attention had turned to Andrea and before Aegnor could move her from between them, his cousin was up and across the room. Aegnor had watched as Carnistir had looked into Andrea's eyes, and then he turned his gaze to Aegnor. Carnistir's eyes twinkled with mirth, his smile wicked.

He knew. Of course he would know. He had looked into her eyes and saw Aegnor's own light within. Carnistir's voice whispered gleefully through Aegnor's mind.

"You did it! You actually did it! You completed the bond with her you naughty little monkey!"

"Get out of my mind Carnistir," Aegnor's voice hissed back.

"Oh certainly", his voice giggled in reply, "I would simply love to have this conversation out loud …"

"Damn you Carnistir, if you –" Aegnor did not finish his thought for Andrea's voice spoke up between them and Carnistir smile widened.

"A moment if you please," Carnistir's voice cooed through Aegnor's mind as he turned to Andrea.

"Yes my darling," he had cooed, "cousins."

For Aegnor, that was the final straw. He gave a quick apology to Andrea as he grabbed Carnistir by the arm and whisked him across the room.

"What the hell do you want?" Aegnor growled in Quenya, desperately trying to keep his voice from raising to a shout.

"Why, simply trying to get to know my new in-law Aegnor," Carnistir blinked innocently, his quenya smooth and innocuous, "like any dutiful relation would."
"I am not in the mood for your games Carnistir," Aegnor snapped. "If there is a purpose to your breaking into my home then I suggest you get to it, otherwise leave."

"You know," Carnistir sniffed, "usually after one creates the bond they tend to be much less … tense. But then, you have been waiting an unusually long time …"

"That's it –" Aegnor grabbed his arm once more, this time with the intention of getting him to the elevator.

"Wait, wait," Carnistir protested, his hands raised as if in surrender, "I will stop, I promise, please. It just so happens I need your help so … I'm sorry. Please."

Aegnor looked at his cousin and his brow furrowed slightly, his mouth pressed in to a thin line. It may have been the first time Aegnor had ever heard that word come out of his cousin's mouth. Please. Carnistir took that as a sign to continue.

"I believe something is stirring, across the sea to the east. I had tracked it once before but it turned out to be more formidable than I had anticipated and the weapons I had were not capable of dispatching it. You had said that you had collected many artifacts and I was hoping that you may have something in your collection that could help …" Carnistir paused and it seemed to Aegnor that he struggled to say the words. "And I was hoping you might join me."

Aegnor blinked. "Join you?"

Carnistir sighed. "As I said, it turned out to be much more formidable than anticipated. We thought, well, Hayley thought that perhaps it would good for me to bring someone else with experience with this sort of thing … not that your last experience ended so well but," Carnistir raised his hands as Aegnor reached for him once more to show him the exit, "this time I happened to agree. So here I am, asking for your … company on this."

Aegnor looked at him, his eyes narrowing. "You need my help."

"I do not need your help." he huffed indignantly. "This is for Hayley's comfort, not mine. It would be a sort of … assistant type of … thing …"

Aegnor did not speak. Carnistir sighed.

"Just think about it. Meet me in the morning for coffee, same place as before. I promise to be civil." Carnistir gave him a wicked grin. "And you know how I good I am about keeping my promises." Carnistir's face slid from mischievous to one of exasperation when Aegnor gave no response. "It was a joke Aegnor."

Aegnor did not think it was funny. He opened his mouth to tell Carnistir just what he could do with the assistant position he was offering him when a single thought suddenly scorched through his mind.

\textit{He will break your heart}

The thought slammed into Aegnor's very being, causing him to stagger back a step. He looked over to Andrea.

"No," he gasped.

He crossed the room in two swift steps, catching Andrea in his arms as she slumped forward.
Why would you love me, and yet set this gulf between us …

The words dug into Aegnor's mind, rending their way across the bond, ripping at his consciousness.

"No, no," Aegnor breathed as he wrapped one arm around her waist while the other cradled the back of her head. "Andrea, Andrea look at me," he said, his voice sounded hoarse to his ears as he struggled to control his panic. Her eyes had taken on a faraway look and a single tear slowly trailed down her cheek. An image of woman on her knees, her hands covering her face as she wept came through the bond. "Andreth," he pleaded, "look at me please! I am here."

"Oh dear," a voice drawled lazily from behind him, "is she regressing?"

Aegnor fought back the swell of panic tinged with anger that threatened to lash out. He glanced over his shoulder to see Carnistir leaning casually against the kitchen island as he peeked over Aegnor's shoulder.

"What are you talking about," he growled as he turned his attention back to Andrea.

"Regression, backsliding." Carnistir articulated each word as if he were talking to a child, "having a relapse in memories. I told you this would become more recurrent once the bond was made." A vague memory of Carnistir relaying this warning flitted in the back of Aegnor's mind. "Her senses are heightened," Carnistir continued, nonchalantly picking at his nails, "she is especially sensitive to you. Instead of panicking and using the name from another life time, use the bond. Remind her these are just memories of a life long past."

Aegnor's mind raced. He could feel the bond of course, it practically throbbed with her pain, her memories. He could see her, see Andreth, see the moment her face fell when he told her he was not the one for her. He could see her, as she fell to her knees as he walked away.

"I … I can't," he rasped, struggling to fight with the emotion that stormed through the bond. "I … she … does not know."

Aegnor could feel Carnistir's eyes as they bore into the back of his head.

"What do you mean 'she does not know'."

"I mean she does not know about the bond!" Aegnor snapped. "Everything happened so fast, there was no opportunity. I … she … we just, there just was no time … and I did not tell her …"

Aegnor's voice trailed off and was met with silence.

In the grand scheme of things, the silence that Aegnor met with more than likely did not go any longer than a few seconds. To Aegnor it was an eternity.

And then the laughter began.

"You did not tell her?" Carnistir hooted behind him. "The valiant, dutiful, magnanimous Aikanáro Ambaráto Arafínwēan, did not tell her? And your reasoning is that there was not time? Oh this is too good."

Aegnor did turn around this time and could not help but cringe. Carnistir was doubled over with laughter, one hand holding onto the island while the other pressed to his knee. Had he not been holding onto Andrea he would have thrown him out the window. He opened his mouth to tell Carnistir to leave when he felt a change in the bond, like a fluttering of consciousness. He turned
back to the woman in his arms.

"Andreth," he whispered absently, his concern returning.

"That is not her name you fool. Gods Aikanáro, you really screwed the proverbial pooch on this one," Carnistir sneered behind him.

Aegnor wanted to tell his cousin exactly where he could do with himself. He wanted to get up and thrash him solidly around the room. But the realization of just what he had done, the shame he felt at his actions, the awareness of Carnistir being right to mock him crashed down around him.

"Will you just go," was all he could muster.

Perhaps Carnistir could sense the undisputed victory and Aegnor's surrender to defeat because he stopped his gloating.

"I am only trying to help," he sighed, his voice cool. "She will be fine. I, however, will need and answer soon. You know how to reach me."

And with that, he left Aegnor to pick up the pieces.

Aegnor's footsteps faltered for a second as he rounded the corner and made his way down the next block. There were just so many pieces to pick up.

He had no one to blame other than himself. He would love to blame what happened to Andrea last night on Carnistir of course. Had he not been there then perhaps nothing would have happened. At least not so soon anyway. But Aegnor knew it would have happened eventually. And, according to his cousin it could be only the beginning. He had meant to tell her. He wanted to tell her with all of his heart, with all that he was, as pathetic as that is at the moment. But broaching the subject had become far more complicated after the weekend. Not that it had not already been so. How does one tell another that they are a centuries old being whose people had left the land ages ago while he made the choice to return from a self-imposed exile in hell to wander the earth?

Aegnor came to a stop in front of the alley to Freemans. Carnistir's motorcycle was already parked outside. Aegnor made his way down the alley and walked through the door.

The clinking of silverware and glass echoed through the empty café as the one or two employees who were responsible for the morning prep went about their business. A quick scan revealed Carnistir at the back of the room lounging at a table, idly stirring one of the two cups of coffee before him. One of the employees, a younger man with his hair pulled back in a bun, made to stop Aegnor at the door till Carnistir called out.

"It's alright Michael, he's with me."

Michael with the bun gave Aegnor a cursory nod and went about his business. Aegnor walked to the table and took the seat across from Carnistir. Carnistir said nothing as Aegnor took his seat. He simply stopped stirring his coffee, tapping the spoon twice on the rim before setting it off to the side as he sipped delicately from his cup. To anyone else, Carnistir's face would reveal nothing. To anyone else, they would simply see the banal expression that Carnistir had mastered in their youth. But Aegnor knew better. Aegnor could see so much more. And as he looked into his cousin's eyes, eyes that never left Aegnor's as he sat down, he could see them almost crackle with glee. The muscle in Aegnor's jaw twitched as he concentrated on maintaining control.

Carnistir set down his coffee with a satisfied sigh and leaned back into his seat, a slow smug smile crept across his face as he blinked lazily at Aegnor. This is punishment Aegnor realized. This is his
punishment sent from the Valar for what he had done. It seemed fitting considering there was nothing more torturous than having to deal with his cousin. Still, there were matters that needed to be addressed before purgatory began.

"Do not ever enter my home uninvited again Carnistir," Aegnor growled quietly in Quenya. "The next time I will not be so welcoming."

A look of feigned contrition came over Carnistir's face. "Oh, of course, forgive me. But you must know I would never have done such a thing if it were not a matter of utmost urgency. Which reminds me," he clicked his tongue as he picked up his coffee once more, "you really should lock your windows Aegnor. Anyone could get in there and you have so many nice things. Have you ever considered an alarm?" He blinked innocuously at Aegnor over his cup.

Aegnor's teeth clenched. He refused to let himself be baited. "I will take that under advisement."

"Oh good," Carnistir chirped. "So, what shall we talk about?"

Aegnor leaned back in his own seat as he drummed his fingers on the table. "Really Carnistir, why do you insist on trying to torment me?"

"Oh no," Carnistir barked out a laugh, "you do not require my help with that. You do quite well on your own."

Aegnor could not really argue with that.

"So I have something you need then? Is that not what you said? Some item to help you?"

Carnistir's eyes glinted as he considered Aegnor for a moment. His head tilted to the side, small banal little smirk on his face. He set his coffee on the table and leaned back once more in his chair, lacing his fingers across his chest.

"Very well then," he sighed. "Are you aware you have weapons that were forged by Telchar in your collection?"

"I had my suspicions," Aegnor replied as he poured cream into his own cup as he stirred it idly.

"Well suspect no longer. They are most certainly dwarvish in make and have his mark on them. You even have some Noldorin weapons in that little cache of yours. First age weapons and some, I believe, crafted by Telperinquar."

Aegnor's eyebrows raised slightly at that. "Interesting," he mumbled almost to himself, "it would explain their sustained condition."

"Indeed," Carnistir agreed. "It would most likely take minimal effort on one's part with the proper knowledge to bring them to working condition."

"And I suppose you wish to use one of these?"

"You suppose correctly. One in weapon in particular. One with a black blade."

Aegnor paused with his coffee cup halfway to his lips to look at Carnistir. He knew of which blade his cousin spoke of. He slowly set his coffee back onto the table.

"Not that blade Carnistir. That blade is … tainted."

"Oh I would imagine it is. It was forged by one even blacker than the blade itself. Pure malice that
"That blade is no joking matter Carnistir. There are times when I am certain it is aware. How did you find it? I had that locked up in a case that was sealed in a safe."

"How could I not find it," Carnistir muttered, "it practically called to me. How do you not hear it? And where did you find it?"

"I ignore it." Aegnor sipped at his coffee. "I found it in the residence of a young captain in Louyang, China. Cao Cao was his formal name, but he was known more commonly as Mengde by those close to him. How he had come in possession of the sword I do not know, but he must have been able to sense some trace of its malevolence for he had it locked away in a case that was covered with symbols and spells to contain it. The incantations did nothing of course, other than to give some comfort for those who possessed it. But I recognized it immediately, without even seeing it, because it called to me in Sindarin." A chill had come over Aegnor at the memory despite the jacket he wore. "It was not difficult to get Mengde to part with it. I believe its enmity may know no bounds." He looked at Carnistir. "I do not know the history of this sword Carnistir, but it must be dark. Surely there is something else that can help you."

"I suppose I could use something else," Carnistir shrugged, "but as I am almost certain I have faced this foe before, I feel that I may need something a little extra this time around."

"This is no ordinary blade," chided Aegnor. "It is not a toy."

"I know," Carnistir sniffed indignantly, "but like will, at times, call to like. And this is no ordinary enemy."

"Just what is this thing you are hunting?"

"Something … ancient. Perhaps not nearly as ancient as you and I, but close. How it has been able to remain is beyond me. Some form of dark magic I'm sure. But I mean to be rid of her this time." Carnistir gave Aegnor a pointed look. "And I could use some help."

"Are you so desperate?" Aegnor practically snorted as he sipped from his cup. Carnistir shrugged. "This is no ordinary enemy. And you do have some experience with this, or at least you did, once. Hayley is capable but I feel this –"

Aegnor almost spat out his coffee. "You would bring her to something like this," he coughed.

"How could I not bring her," Carnistir affirmed completely nonplussed. "She would not have it otherwise. Oh don't give me that look Aegnor. I do not keep anything from her nor do I force her to do anything she does not wish to do. She is of her own mind and I would not have it any other way. She is not stupid, she knows her limits. She is mortal and is smart enough to know when to run and I do not seek to put her in unnecessary danger. But there have been situations when I might not have made it out without her assistance. Something she has been more than happy to point out to me on numerous occasions."

"That is dangerous Carnistir. Smart enough or no, she could still be killed."

"She is her own woman," he snapped, "and is capable of weighing the risks, as am I. Why do you think I am here now talking to you. I would never put her in danger willingly."

"While I, on the other hand …"
"Are expendable, yes."

Aegnor glared at Carnistir. "Touching."

"I am not the one who started this little tête-à-tête. You asked and I answered, and honestly I might add. I just so happen to agree with you on this one thing. She should not accompany me ever, as far as I am concerned. By all means, feel free to tell her this. I would love to see that conversation go down. But be warned, she is no shrinking violet."

Aegnor thought of the tiny dark haired girl with the purple streaks in her hair. He remembered how she stared unflinchingly into his eyes, her silent challenge had come across clear. He had to agree with that assessment.

"But," Carnistir continued, "as I said, she is smart. And she knows this time her help will not be enough. And that her presence could also be a danger. And so she suggested I talk to you."

Aegnor blinked. "She suggested?"

"Yes," he sniffed. "She seems to think you are … ugh, genuine and can be trusted. She … insisted I at least ask you."

It was Aegnor's turn to smirk. "That must have been painful."

"Yes, since you ask, it was rather unpleasant. But if it keeps her from certain death, I am willing to swallow my pride." Carnistir paused. He looked at Aegnor, the mocking sneer gone, his eyes earnest, open and, if Aegnor did not know better, pleading. "If you do not come, she will insist on going in with me, to meet this thing. And if she does, I do not know if she will come out alive."

Aegnor tapped his fingers on the table as he studied Carnistir. Carnistir waited patiently.

"I would go as an equal …" Aegnor said.

"Of course."

"Not as your assistant …"

"No."

"Or some lacky to do your bidding."

"Never."

"And any suggestions I make …"

"Will be given due consideration, you have my word," Carnistir reassured sweetly. "But keep in mind, I have been doing this longer than you." He threw his hands in the air when Aegnor shot him a look. "Just throwing that out there," he said innocently.

Aegnor raked his fingers through his hair before rubbing at his chin as he considered Carnistir. With a sigh he dropped his hand into his lap. "Alright. I will go."

"Excellent! We leave in a week."

"A week?" exclaimed Aegnor.

"You need longer? Hmm, I suppose you might be right. When was the last time you took up a
"Now what does that mean," Aegnor huffed.

"It means, it has been some time since swords were the fashion and I would imagine you are in need of some practice, yes?"

Aegnor grimaced. It has been sometime since he last wielded a weapon.

"That is what I thought," Carnistir smirked. "I suppose we can push the date back a bit for some practice. There is a gym that Hayley spars at that we may be able to access afterhours."

Aegnor rolled his eyes. "Very well."

"Good!" Carnistir beamed. "It's settled then."

Aegnor simply nodded. They sat there in silence, Carnistir was still smiling as Aegnor sipped once more from his now cold coffee. Carnistir leaned forward to rest both elbows on the table, his chin resting in his hands.

"So," he purred, "how's Andrea?"

Aegnor's mouth became a thin line. "She is fine," he replied quietly.

"Oh good. So, will she be joining us then? Hayley will be so excited to have someone other than us big stinky males around. You know, someone she has something in common with. In-laws!"

The mocking chirpy tone to Carnistir's voice caused Aegnor to ball his hands into tight fists and his jaw to clench once more. He immediately regretted agreeing to help. He released a very tightly controlled breath.

"I am not going to have this discussion with you Carnistir. You are not to bring this up at all while on this trip."

"Me? Never!" gasped Carnistir. "I can't make any promises about Hayley though."

Aegnor's eyes went wide. He had not thought of that, the fact that Andrea and Hayley were friends. The possibility of anyone other than Carnistir telling Andrea what had happened had never even crossed his mind. What had Carnistir already told her? Hayley had been able to tell what he was the night he first saw Carnistir at the bar, would she see this as well?

"What have you told her?"

Carnistir waved his hand dismissively. "You needn't worry yourself about me. I have said nothing nor do I intend too. This is your mess to deal with and none of my concern. Although," that wicked smile spread once more across his face, "I would love to know how you are going to explain this one."

Aegnor stood up.

"You are right Carnistir. It is none of your concern." He turned and walked to the door only to be followed by Carnistir's voice sing-songing from behind him.

"I'll call you!"

Aegnor cringed and wondered just what he had agreed too.
Andrea began the slow trudge up the stair well to her car. It seemed to her that the steps were growing and becoming taller with every fall of her foot. A four story climb seemed like an appropriate if not somewhat unfair ending to an exhausting day.

She had woken up in Agner’s apartment slightly confused at first. Her head felt as if it had been thoroughly rung and her vision fuzzed as if she had a hangover. She blinked blearily at her surroundings and found her clothes had been washed and folded and were sitting at the foot of the bed. The smell of fresh brewed coffee pulled at her senses and she realized she must have stayed at Agner’s instead of returning to her apartment as she had originally planned. She got up from the bed and stumbled over to where her phone was to check the time. She found it quite annoying upon realizing he had absolutely no clocks anywhere in his house. Who lives like that? She had picked up her phone and was about to head to the kitchen to grab a cup of coffee when she saw the time.

Six forty five … six forty five? SIX FORTY FIVE!

Things had become quite rushed after that and she was glad that Agner was nowhere in the apartment at the moment to distract her. After getting dressed, getting her coffee, and then getting her car, she would have a little less than an hour to make it across town in morning traffic to campus and then find a place to park and then still have to make across campus in time for her classes. She had let a litany of curses out as she raced through the apartment grabbing as much as she could in her haste.

Andrea’s footsteps echoed through the garage, each step seemingly pounding against her head harder than the other. She had just began to feel like they may never end when she finally came to the level with her car. Fortunately she would not have to walk very far to get to it. While adjunct faculty were not given much in the way of perks, one of the few that they were given was parking.

Andrea climbed into the jeep and quickly locked the doors as soon as she shut them before she sunk into the seat. She felt spent. She closed her eyes with a heavy sigh. They day had trudged along at a maddeningly slow pace. It had not been a bad day per say, but she still felt exhausted. Still her mood had remained good. Memories of the weekend would creep in every so often and she would find herself grinning stupidly and then she would spare a quick glance around the room to make sure no one had seen her with said big stupid grin on her face.

Maybe I should check on the status of my Depo shot. And cue big stupid grin.

Every time thoughts of Agner would come into her head her mood became significantly lighter, taking some of the edge out of her exhaustion. Still, it was not consistent. In fact, earlier that morning she had found herself feeling quite annoyed for reasons she did not know. But then she would think of the lake and the tent and then the cabin and the stupid grin would quickly follow. Much like the stupid grin that was on her face this very moment.

Andrea opened her eyes with a soft chuckle. *I am losing my mind*, she thought. She sat up straight and slipped her key into the ignition of her car. She would have to drive the car over to the garage where she paid the equivalent of a second rent to keep it and then walk the six blocks back to her apartment. Or maybe she would take the train. She was feeling exceptionally lazy today.

As she drove she could not help but wonder what Agner was doing right now. She had not heard from him and even though she told herself she was not going to call him tonight, she could not help but check her phone regularly. She thought it would be best to stay at her apartment tonight. Even
though he had said he would like for her to stay, Andrea did not want to overkill it by hanging around all the time. One had to play a little hard to get. Of course, after the weekend they just had, it did seem a little silly trying to come off as not easy. And there it was, that stupid grin back on her face yet again.

Andrea entered the garage and pulled into her space. She gathered up her paperwork and placed them as neatly as she could in her bag. There were still things in the back of the jeep that would need to be unloaded but since there were no perishable items, Andrea decided it could wait. There were also things that she had left at Agner’s in her rush to get out the door this morning. As good a reason to call him later as any she supposed.

Andrea made her way down the stairs to the train almost instinctively. After a long day of work and an even longer, and surprising night, she figured she deserved the rest. And what a surprising night it had been. Agner has a cousin. A cousin who lives right here in the city.

She had almost forgotten about him, although she did not know how she could. What had he said his name was, Cirian was it? One had to admit he was quite pleasing to look at. Beautiful even, but a different kind of beautiful than Agner. Agner’s beauty had a softness about it, an openness, a heat that constantly threatened to envelope her.

His cousin’s beauty though, it had … an edge. There was a cool aloofness to it. The type of beauty that was almost intimidating. And his eyes. They were the same color grey as Agner’s and they even caught the light in the same peculiar manner. That was where the similarities ended though because when he had looked at her Andrea could not shake the feeling that he was taking her apart bit by bit and every little dark secret that she had, whether she knew it or not, was revealed.

But of course he was gorgeous. Andrea wondered if his whole family looked like this. She was not sure she would be able to handle the females if they did.

Andrea rocked slightly to the gentle, rhythmic clacking of the train as it rumbled on. She wondered why Agner had not told her anything about him. Andrea had been under the impression that Agner had no contact with any of his family. Agner had barely ever mentioned his cousins, much less that one even lived here. He had been surprised when they had found him in his apartment, of that she was certain. Andrea was even more certain that Agner was furious about it. Even though he had not said anything, she had no doubt that the cousin was not welcome. But why? Aside from the fact that he had essentially broken in to Agner’s apartment, why was Agner so angry? To most people that would probably be plenty enough of a reason but Andrea knew there was more. She did not know how she knew, but she did. Some sort of gut instinct she supposed. She wondered if this could be one of the trouble making cousins he had spoken of from his youth. If it was she hoped that his trouble making days were behind him.

The train rumbled to a stop and Andrea rose from her seat and made her way off. Andrea’s memory of that night became a bit muddled after that. The headache had come on alarmingly quick. Andrea had always suffered from the occasional migraine but this latest one had been rather intense. She could only vaguely remember Agner carrying her into his bedroom. Not exactly how she hoped the night would have ended.

Andrea felt the familiar stupid little smile once again on her face as she once again relived the weekend in her mind. It really had been a great weekend. She had been perhaps a bit more forward than even she was used too, but it had been worth it. That first night, while wonderful, had been a bit hasty on both their parts, but the next morning had been far more satisfying. It was almost as if he knew exactly what she wanted, where she wanted him most, responding to her in every way. She remembered the warmth of his skin pressed against hers and his hands running along her body.
When she looked into his eyes it was as if the universe expanded, whirling around them, swirling them into the stars. They had become one in that moment and nothing would ever come between them. Not again. This time would be different. This time ….

Andrea staggered over her feet and then quickly steadied herself. *This time?* she thought incredulously. *What the hell do you mean “this time”? I’m losing my goddam mind. Snap out of it and focus crazy girl.*

Andrea adjusted the strap of her bag back onto her shoulder and began walking only to come to an abrupt stop once more. She looked around in confusion. This was not her apartment. In fact that was not even the street her apartment was on. Andrea stood there completely flummoxed, having no idea where she was or how she got there.

“Well hello,” a familiar voice called softly from behind her. Andrea turned around to see Agner standing in a doorway with a set of keys in his hand. “This is a nice surprise,” he said as he walked over to where she stood and wrapped an arm around her waist, pulling her close against him. “I was just thinking about you,” he smiled as he leaned in and gave her a gentle lingering kiss.

Andrea’s head spun in the same disorienting dance it always did when in his presence as she reluctantly gave way to his lips parting from hers. She looked up at him, still confused.

“What are you doing here?”

Agner gave her an amused look. “Well I do occasionally do business here, or don’t you remember?”

Andrea looked at the door Agner had been standing in front of and then in the windows of the building and realized where she was. It was the antique store where she had first met him. *But this place is on Downing,* she thought in disbelief. *I’m in Soho. How the hell did I get to Soho? I took the train? I don’t even remember doing that! What is going on with me?*

“Yeah I … I guess, I just don’t …” Andrea looked back to see Agner staring down at her and while his face was void of expression, Andrea knew he was concerned. She waved her hand dismissively and did her best attempt at a reassuring laugh. “Yes, of course I remember. I just wasn’t planning on coming by tonight is all,” she brought her arms up and around his neck as she stood up on her tiptoes. “I don’t want you to get sick of me.”

Agner did not say anything at first, only stared at her, his eyes searching hers. Andrea felt her heart quicken. *He thinks I’m crazy, I know it,* she thought. But then he smiled and his hand cupped her chin as he leaned in once more, his lips brushing hers as he spoke.

“Never,” he whispered as he kissed her.

Agner finished locking up the shop and insisted on getting take out and then going to his apartment. Andrea was too tired to protest and figured there was not much of a point anyway seeing as how she was already here. She still made a mental note to try to get an appointment to see someone in the morning. If she was having episodes in the vein of some sort of bizarre walking blackout, then she should get herself checked out. But for now, it could wait. She was safe with Agner.

Besides this felt right anyway and she could not understand why she ever wanted to stay away in the first place. She had to admit that she enjoyed when he took her hand and placed it in the crook of his arm, escorting her to the small Vietnamese restaurant around the corner. She enjoyed it when he would tighten his arm against her hand any time she started to drift to far as they walked. And
she especially liked it when other people stared at them, a smug satisfied look on her face that said “yeah that’s right, he’s with me.”

They returned to Agner’s apartment and ate. He sat and listened as she complained about her day and how she playfully blamed him for her exhaustion. She had been handed a pile of papers to grade for Professor Jones and how she felt he should help her with the task, something he said he would happily assist her with if she so wished.

Once they had finished eating and cleaned up, Andrea sat down on the sofa and began to pull out some of the papers from her lab that day and spread them on the coffee table.

“I really should do these at my place,” she said mostly to herself.

“I don’t mind,” Agner called from the kitchen.

Andrea just shook her head. She really should be going to her place. She would work better there. All of her references were there. She would accomplish nothing here and she knew it. Still she did not leave. It felt too good to be here. She wanted to be here, sitting with him, just doing nothing.

And he wanted the same thing. She could tell. In the past it had always seemed to Andrea that she was the one, in any relationship, that put forth any effort. Oh in the beginning, it was always wonderful. Nothing but constant attention and texting. But eventually it always seemed to die out. Eventually the other person just did not want to be around her as much as she wanted to be around them.

Andrea looked up from the table to see Agner standing across from her, staring down at the papers. He handed her a glass of wine from across the table.

“Thanks but,” Andrea took the glass from his hand and turned to set it down on the side table, “I’ve never really been a big fan of red. Too many Eucharists as a kid.”

“Pity, it’s quite good. It is said that the taste varies according to the individual,” he said as he raised the glass up into the light, swirling the garnet liquid within. “That everyone who drinks it experiences something different. Something specifically to their liking.”

Andrea looked at the glass in her hand and then back at Agner. “It’s quite good eh?”

Agner smiled at her. “Quite.”

Andrea brought the glass to her lips and took a sip and even though she tried to temper her reaction so as not to give off any indication at how much she disliked red wine, her brows still rose in surprise. It was nothing like the stale, watered down wine she used to have to drink every day while a girl in Catholic school. There was no assault on her nose as she rose the glass, expecting the familiar punch of acidic scent she likened to rubbing alcohol. Instead, it was aromatic and sweet. The taste was not bland and diluted, scratching at her throat as it tore its way down. This was spicy and yet mellow, almost elegant with a smooth finish that reminded her of sweet dried fruit. Andrea looked over at Agner who grinned at her from over his glass.

“Oh, so I’m impressed,” Andrea said as she watched the wine glow a deep red in front of the fire. “Where did you say you got it?”

“I didn’t,” Agner murmured as he moved around the coffee table. He brought the glass to his nose and inhaled the aroma. “I don’t think you will ever come across it’s like again either, unfortunately. The secrets to making it are long lost. I was surprised myself when I found it. The merchant who owned that cellar had no idea what he had. It is extremely rare and I only serve it to
the most special of guests.”

Agner bent down and planted a kiss on the top of Andrea’s head before sitting down in the large chair next to the sofa.

Andrea watched Agner as he set himself gracefully down and picked up one of the papers on the table. A simple benign gesture made into the entrancing motion. She sipped her wine. She was so aware of him and she could not help but wonder if he felt the same. She prayed that it was not all in her head and that he, much like all the others would tire of her soon. Agner’s eyes moved from the paper to hers and she wondered how she could have ever have thought them peculiar. She felt a warm sensation begin to travel slowly up her spine, flooding her face and quickly looked down. No, she did not think she would get much done here at all.

“Agner …” She could still feel his eyes on her.

“Yes,” he answered softly.

“Why didn’t you tell me about your cousin?”

Andrea looked up and saw Agner’s face was completely neutral, but she knew that was not the case. Her question had taken him by surprise. It was not what he had expected.

“It’s alright. You don’t have to tell me. I’m not trying to pry, I just –”

“No,” he interrupted, “no. You are right. I should have told you. You have a right to know.” He sighed as his eyes moved down to the paper in his hand while not really seeing it. “I did not tell you anything because I was not aware he was even in the city until just recently. It had been a bit of a shock for the both of us, when we found each other. We had never really been close and relations had always been … complicated.”

Andrea sipped her wine and waited, she knew that there was more coming.

“The last time I had seen him, and by the last time I mean when we were much younger, it had been somewhat contentious to say the least. There had been some disagreement on … well, there had been many disagreements between his family and mine. Far too many disagreements. It goes all the way back to our fathers. Even though his father and mine had …” Agner stopped suddenly, his brows coming together slightly as his mouth pressed in to a thin line. He looked down at his hands and shook his head. When he looked back up, his face was smooth once more but his eyes were guarded. “Seeing him again brought up old memories I thought I had put behind me. I had mistakenly assumed that after we spoke we would not see each other.”

Andrea looked at him from over her glass. “But …”

“But now it seems he needs my help with something.”

“Well?”

Agner gave her a curious look. “Well what?”

“Are you going to help him?” Andrea asked.

“Yes,” Agner sighed and pinched the space between his eyes. “I don’t know. I am not so sure now if it is a good idea.”

“I think you should.”
For the second time that night, Andrea knew she had startled him. He had not even flinched at what she had said but she still knew. Perhaps it was because she was becoming more accustomed to little quirks the more time they spent together. A subtle twitch of the finger, a slight tilt to the head, who knew.

“I think you should,” she repeated. Andrea was not sure if it was the wine talking, it could be though. She was starting to feel a little heady. She took another drink for good measure. “I mean, think about it. What must it have taken for him to come and ask you for help? Going off of just the little you have told me so far, you weren’t close, it sounds like you weren’t even friendly. He had to have known that you would not want to talk to him, much less help him. So it can’t be no small thing for him to find you and ask you for help. Right? Maybe he’s changed from the brat he used to be. It’s not like he’s asking you to do anything illegal right? … Right?”

“No, at least … I do not think so.”

“Well okay then,” Andrea chirped brightly. It was definitely the wine talking. “This could be really good for the two of you. Sort of reconnect. A new beginning.” Definitely the wine.

Agner chuckled. “I don’t know Andrea. With Carnistir you never can tell.”

“Cirian.”

Agner looked up at her. “What?”

“Cirian … I thought, I mean he said his name was Cirian.”

“Yes Cirian. He did say that didn’t he.”

Andrea hesitated. “Is that not his name?”

“No, it is his name. At least, it is now anyway.”

“He changed it?”

Agner looked at her now intently. “Yes. Most likely after he came here. Just as I did.”

Andrea stared into his eyes and it seemed as if the light that reflected within resembled glowing coals. Her head began to swim a little. What was she seeing in there?

“You changed your name?”

“My family name is Aikanáro Ambarato Arafinwēan. I was called Aegnor.”

The name danced around Andrea’s head. Familiar and yet completely foreign. Agner’s eyes were locked on to hers. It felt almost as if he were calling to her.

“Andrea,” he said softly, “there are things you need to know about me.”

It was then when she saw it, in his eyes, behind whatever fire seemed to burn from within. He could not hide it. Not from her.

Fear. He was afraid.

Andrea’s world seemed to come back into focus as she pushed back at the effects of the wine. Her heart began to beat a little harder. What could he possibly be afraid of? She stood up and walked over to where he sat.
“Agner what? What is it? Whatever it is, it doesn’t matter I promise. So you changed your name. Big deal. It’s was a mouthful anyway. Agner is way easier. And besides,” she gave him a playful reassuring smile and moved herself over him, straddling his lap so she could face him, “its kind of sexy. I like it.”

She began to move her arms around his neck when he stopped her, grabbing both her hands in his and holding them against his chest. She could feel his heart, and it pounded.

“No Andrea, please. You have to listen to me. There are things I must tell you. It is important that you know –”

“Agner,” she interrupted, “or Aegnor, or Ayekano or whatever your name is, I don’t care. Do you understand? The only thing that could run me off at this point is if you are married … you’re not married are you?”

“What?”

“Are you married?” The world came completely into focus for Andrea now. She leaned back and looked at Agner. Her hands gripped at his shirt. “Are you? Is there someone else? Someone I need to know about?”

“No! Andrea no! There is no one else –”

“Because you said that there was someone once, but that it was a long time ago –”

“Andrea you –”

“Was it not that long ago after all? You said she was gone, is she not?”

“Yes she is gone,” his voice boomed. He sitting up straight now, leaning in to Andrea, gripping her hands in his. They were like fire against her skin and the rest of the room seemed to go dark while he burned like a bright flame. “She is gone. And it haunts me Andrea. It has haunted me every day of this miserable life, knowing too late that I turned away from the only woman I would ever love. Until I met you. Until you Andrea. It was I dream that I could ever truly be happy, that I would ever find it again. Until you. There is no one else. There will never be anyone else. I do not want anyone else. And now I am afraid,” his voice softened to a whisper, “Afraid that when you find out the true nature of who I am, the selfishness of what I have done, I will lose you. Once again I will lose.”

Agner’s hands relaxed around hers and he collapsed back against the chair, his light dimming. Andrea sat motionless, staring down at him. After a moment she took his chin in her hand and lifted his face up to hers. His eyes remained closed. He would not look at her. She could feel him trembling.

I am such an idiot, she thought. There isn’t anybody else. He thinks something is going to happen to me. Like that girl. He thinks I am going to go away. I am so pathetic.

She almost laughed out loud at how foolish she had been.

“Agner,” she sighed as she laid a gentle kiss against one eyelid.

“Agner,” she soothed as she kissed the other. She moved her face before his, foreheads pressed together, lips barely touching.

“I am not going anywhere,” she whispered, kissing the corner of his mouth, “I’m not that girl. And
“Andrea,” he rasped, his hands now gripped her hips, “please.”

“And,” she continued, her mouth moving along his cheek and down his neck, “I am not,” she kissed his throat, “going,” her hands moved down his chest, “anywhere,” and to his lap where she felt him respond to her touch.

His grip tightened on her as her mouth found his once more, her lips lightly brushing against his, teasing.

“And I love you too,” her tongue darted against his teeth as she pushed her hips against him, smiling when she heard him give a little moan, “Aegnor.”

It seemed that the name was all it took for his barely held restraint to finally give. Andrea felt herself being lifted up as his mouth pressed against hers and he carried her down the hall. They came to the bedroom and fell onto the bed. She had barely pulled his shirt over his head before he tore at her clothes as if annoyed by the whole convention of wearing clothes at all. But once the tedious chore of removing the barrier of clothing was done, there were no more distractions, each one’s focus on the other.

And soon he was kissing her again. His strong gentle hands stroking her, his hands, his lips, his tongue. All awareness became him. The warmth of his skin, the hardness of his body against hers. His face, his neck, the sweet taste of him and the groan inducing soul shattering way he drove her straight out of her mind.

How could he ever think that she would leave him? She just found him.

They rippled on the bed like a wave on the sea and he moved against her as if he knew every part of her body. He was slow, rhythmic, gentle, moving down her body until she thought she may cry out in her need to have him one with her, and only then did he comply, crashing into her.

And in that moment she could see him, truly feel him. His joy, his love, his pain, his fear. All of it bared and open for her. His need for her.

The sweet spasm went through her and she felt as if her very soul rose in the air. And then she was nothing but her body as her feet pointed like a dancer’s and her toes curled. Then she breathed and she felt her body move as if she had opened to all of him, and then she took a breath and let herself go tumbling.

And there was nothing but the sweetness, just the sweetness, the incredible, oh the …

And then she collapsed back down to earth …

… and then Agner panting as she pressed him hard against her.

The night did not go the way Aegnor planned.

Not at all.
He sat in the window watching the sleeping figure in his bed.

*I am a fool*, he thought bitterly.

The figure on the bed stirred slightly. Aegnor calmed his mind and focused on creating a barrier, keeping his emotions from the bond. She could pick up on much now, too much. He had to be careful.

Today, as he took care of random errands and other small tasks that he had put off, he had thought about her. About where she was, what she was doing, and if he should go to see her. Hoping perhaps she would come see him. He thought of their weekend. Of how she felt, of how she tasted. He could still smell her on his skin. He wanted desperately to see her again, to be with her again, but could not. Not till he told her everything. Not until he told her the truth of who and what he is. The very thought had terrified him. But he would not run. Not from her. Not again. They had become one and nothing would ever come between them. Not this time.

When he had looked up and saw her he almost could not contain his joy. She had come to him, as if she knew how much he longed to see her again, as if she heard him call.

And after a moment he realized she did.

He realized, as she stood there confused and bewildered at how she had gotten there, that she had heard him call. That he had pulled her to him, like some creature tethered to a leash, he had unintentionally pulled her to him with the bond.

A damn bloody fool.

And still that bond pulled at him throughout the night. He fought the torrent of emotion that would rush through for as long as he could. But when she sat astride him, her body moving against him as her lips scorched his skin, and when she said his name ... to hear his name from her lips, he could not hold back any longer.

He could look into her eyes and see the bond aflame between them, a blinding pale fire. The bond, no longer a myth but now a fact, ascends above them and he can see her fëa within. It rises and falls, as if frightened by what it feels, but excited too, by being joined to him for a few seconds before it plummets back to earth.

For an instant he felt her feel his body, felt her register him, his inner sounds, the outer wave of them pressing toward her. And then they both fell into their own urgencies, like waves from separate storms, at first damping, then amplifying the other.

His mind was half in hers. He could feel her loose jointed drift, only an occasional little coil in the current tugging at her harder, moving her toward the flood.

There was still much he had to learn about the bond they shared, so much to figure out. It pulsed between them at times, burning like a wildfire from within so hot that he did not know what do to. And there was no one he could turn too, no one to teach him how to control what he felt.

Well, there was one.

But Aegnor would not turn to him under any circumstance.

No, was on his own with this. And he would have to figure it out. He would have to tell her the truth.
Tomorrow.

Aegnor stood up from the window and walked back over to the bed. He climbed under the covers and curled around Andrea.

Yes, he would figure this out tomorrow.
Aegnor leaned against the ropes that circled the ring that he and Carnistir had sparred in, rubbing at his shoulder as he moved his arm around in large slow circles. Carnistir had gotten a solid hit in that last time. But at least he did not gloat, which was always refreshing.

He was not really surprised at how much came back to him. It had always been a trait of their kind to excel in whatever they chose to set their mind too, and Aegnor had never really wanted to let that part of him go. When they had picked up the bamboo practice swords, he had been pleased to see that he could keep pace with Carnistir in the sparring ring. He had taken a few hits, that was certain, but he had managed to land a few of his own too.

Carnistir, for his part, was a surprisingly gracious sparring partner. While he happily pointed out Aegnor’s missteps, he also complimented his skill. For a short time, Hayley had stood off to the side and watched after letting them in. Even giving the occasional constructive criticism. Aegnor had to admit that he was taken aback at how his cousin would listen and heed her advice. It was something he rarely remembered Carnistir doing when they were young. Of course, there were times when he was not that receptive. Something Hayley would always acknowledge as well.

“You keep exposing your side like that and he’s going to nail you every time,” she shouted at the ring.

“I have this woman,” Carnistir snapped back.

If she was bothered by his response it, she did not show it. Instead, she looked at him and smiled as she turned around to head up the stairs. “You’re so cute when you’re pissy. Good thing you’re always pissy,” she called over her shoulder.

Carnistir would shoot her a look of disapproval but his heart was never in it. He worshiped her. He did not expose his side for Aegnor to tag again.

The gym was not large, a small building where Midtown meets Hell’s Kitchen, with the gym taking up the second and third floors. It had tall brick walls painted white and covered in posters and adverts and bags hanging throughout. The ring took up the front part of the floor while mats covered the rest. They had come to the gym after hours and so the second floor was currently empty. Hayley had headed up to the third to teach her self-defense class. A sort of krav maga/muay thai mix of fighting. There was a ring upstairs that they could have used on the third floor but Hayley had thought it would be best for them to practice down here alone. She had the owners trust and was therefore allowed to come in during the hours when the small gym was closed if she wished. And so it was here she suggested they stay, away from curious eyes. The Eldar in their wrath had always been a sight to behold.

“And I’m not sure my girls can handle this much pretty in one place,” she had added.

They had spent the entire day in the sparring ring. With the gym closed it gave them ample time and Aegnor found himself actually enjoying the experience. He had to admit it felt good to hold a sword, even if only a practice one.

Carnistir and his brothers had always been quite exceptional when it came to swordplay. While the Valar had always strictly forbade the creation of weapons before the darkness, it had long been rumored that his uncle, Carnistir’s father, had forged them in defiance and schooled all of his sons.
thoroughly in all forms of combat. Perhaps that is why it had come as no surprise to Aegnor when the eldest of Carnistir’s brothers had little difficulty learning to hold the sword with his left hand after losing the right.

“You are not nearly as bad as I thought you would be, which is a pleasant surprise,” Carnistir call from across the ring as he began to pull the tape off of his hands. “We may be able to leave on schedule after all.”

Aegnor did not respond to his cousin’s jibe in the slightest, refusing to give him the satisfaction. Besides, Aegnor had held his own and Carnistir knew it. Even if Carnistir would never admit it, the long angry welt on his side said enough. “I am so relieved you are pleased,” he answered.

“Ai all you want. You will thank me in the end. I am only looking out for you and dear Andrea.”

Aegnor glanced at his cousin with narrow eyes as he bent down to step between the ropes. Three days had passed since he had unknowingly pulled Andrea to him and still he had said nothing. It was not that he did not want to, it was just not as easy a subject to broach. How does one tell another that you have bound yourself to them and them to you for all of eternity and beyond? Oh and by the way, if one thinks of the other a little too intently, you may unconsciously control their actions. And you can hear their thoughts … and emotions … and dreams and anything else you may believe is completely unknown. Dealing with that was a tangled mess that Aegnor ran from like a coward. Justifying it by saying he will address it in the morning. And he certainly did not want to address it now. “Your concern is touching,” he said as he straightened, “but unnecessary.”

Aegnor hopped down from the ring and onto the floor. He picked up the t-shirt he had discarded earlier and draped it over one shoulder. “How about you turn your attentions to telling just what we are going after.”

Carnistir had walked to the edge of the ring closest to where Aegnor stood and leaned against the rope, resting on his elbows as he began to pull tape from his other hand. He said nothing at first. He simply gave Aegnor a droll little smile in acknowledgement of what was not being said. Or at least what Aegnor refused to talk about with him.

“I am not entirely certain,” he sighed as he pulled the last of the tape from his hand. “As I said before it is old. Not as old as you or I but old enough. She is powerful but –”

“She?” Aegnor interrupted.

“Is that going to be a problem?”

“I am not entirely certain,” Aegnor replied, mimicking Carnistir’s earlier tone. “What exactly has she done?”

“The list of her evils is long and often involves young men and children. If my assumptions are correct I have faced and dispatched this particular foe twice now and both times she has retreated only to return again just as strong.”

“How do you know she is so old?”

“Because when I first came across her, where was it,” Carnistir tapped his fingers on the rope absently, “the Philippines perhaps? Well anyway, she knew what me for what I am. She asked me how is it I was so far from Oiolossë and called me first born and favored pet of Eru … in Quenya … and then she called me a little shit.”

Aegnor stood stunned at the name. Oiolossë. Another lesser known name in Quenya for Taniquetil
where sat the thrones of Manwë and Varda. How could this creature have such knowledge unless … “Is she some sort of corrupted Maiar?”

“I do not believe so. As far as I can tell she is of Men, although how she has lived this long is beyond me. She has many forms, many names. Gryla, Harionago, Aswang, Baba-Yaga, it all depends on her location, and this bitch gets around. She is a dark force, a force for evil if there ever was one. Oh, and she has a thing for cats.”

“Cats?”

“Yes,” Carnistir’s brow furrowed in consternation, “she uses them somehow, controls them. They do her biding. She has about a hundred … or maybe ten, I can’t be certain.

Aegnor shook his head. “The list of uncertainties seems to be growing.”

“I know,” Carnistir agreed as he leaned back, pulling on the ropes of the ring, “which is why we will need to make a little stop before we face her. I need to get more information.”

“Information? From where?”

“Not where. Who. And that will be an entirely different challenge, albeit not as dangerous.”

Aegnor threw his hands in the air in exasperation. “Oh well, that sounds very reassuring.”

Carnistir simply shrugged. “It is what it is.” In one fluid motion, Carnistir pulled himself swiftly forward and vaulted over the ropes and out of the ring, landing lightly on the ground. “Did you bring it?”

Aegnor looked at his cousin and shook his head once more before turning towards where his bag lay. “Yes.”

“And the armor?”

“It is at my apartment,” Aegnor called over his shoulder.

“You didn’t bring it?”

“No Carnistir,” Aegnor’s voice was thick with mock remorse as he turned, now walking backwards so he could see his cousin, his arms extended out in a contrite manner, “I did not bring the full breastplate, pauldron and helm through Midtown. I was uncomfortable enough simply bringing this. Please forgive me.”

“I was just asking,” Carnistir muttered as leaned against the ring to wait.

Aegnor retrieved the bundle from his bag and carried it gingerly to where Carnistir waited. He set it down gently on the mat and knelt down to unwrap it. At first glance, it looked to be nothing more than a dusty old sword. And ancient heirloom of a time long gone. But upon closer inspection one would find that the sheath that housed the blade did not fit properly nor did it match the hilt. It was tattered and worn and barely held together. Even the hilt belied its appearance as it was wrapped in rotting leather strips that had been worn down and then hastily replaced throughout the years.

But the careful observer would take notice of the pommel for it was crafted from a dark lustrous metal that did not glint in the light. And if one were to go as far as to unsheathe they would find a blade as black and cold as any moonless midwinter night. There was an overall feeling of power
that teemed and swirled from within that blade. An ancient power that crooned like a lover, but was tinged with madness, a slick, oily layer of filth that left the wielder feeling nauseous. It could feel you when you touched it and it begged to be touched. Carnistir knelt down next to Aegnor as he pulled away the last of the wrappings. The blade within seemed to breathe a sigh.

Aegnor grimaced while Carnistir made a hissing noise through his teeth.

“How did you find it?”

“It … called to me,” Aegnor struggled for the proper words. “Well, perhaps not to me specifically, but it seemed as if it were calling. I suppose to anyone who could hear it.”

“Or anything,” Carnistir’s lip curled slightly in disdain.

Aegnor nodded. “I thought it best that I take it. I recognized it for what it is, or what I believe it is. First age? Who made it? Who would be capable of forging such a blade besides …” Aegnor halted abruptly. He had been about to say Fëanor, Carnistir’s father, but stopped himself. He did not wish to offend his cousin or open old wounds. Carnistir simply huffed a low laugh.

“It’s alright,” he chuckled as he stared at the sword, “It would be a logical assumption, given the circumstances when we first walked these lands. But my father’s greatest crime was his pride. All of his creations carry it,” Carnistir’s lips curled into a sardonic smile, “even his children. But this … there is pride there yes, but also more. Something even harder, colder. It was cast in suspicion and anger, forged with malice and tempered with the creator’s own blood.”

“Who then?”

“A dark elf who hid in the woods of Nan Elmoth. Wed our cousin, or raped her, depending on who you were to talk to. Thingol’s own dear brother.”

Aegnor’s eyes had gone wide with realization as Carnistir spoke. “Eöl?” he breathed.

Carnistir barked out a laugh. “That bastard’s line did just as much, if not more damage to the great Houses of the Noldor than my own. Ah, poor proud Turgon, he trusted no one and yet could not see the danger at his own door simply because it was of his blood.”

Aegnor’s lips pursed in disapproval. While he may not have agreed with the choices their cousin had made, he did not blame him. He had been warned of the cost. “He paid his price, as have we all.”

“Indeed.” Carnistir knelt down next to Aegnor and carefully picked up the sword, one hand gripping the hilt. “There were two of these. One was gifted to Thingol and is destined for another purpose. But this one belonged to Eöl himself. It must have survived Gondolin somehow. One would reckon it was gifted with the dark one’s own luck.” In one smooth motion he unsheathed the sword. The light gleamed off of the black blade like oil that oozed its way down towards the hilt, drowning the light rather than reflecting it.

“Is it evil?” Aegnor’s voice had dropped to a whisper without him realizing.

“Not innately,” Carnistir replied just as softly, “at least I do not believe it is. If it is anything like its sister it will accept the will of the bearer.”

“The things it says … the way it … it feels, or makes me feel …” Aegnor winced.

“I suppose it is different for everyone.” By all appearances and tone of voice, one would not have
thought Carnistir the least bit bothered by the sword. Be the subtle tightness around his eyes screamed at Aegnor. “Yes, you are a lustful bitch, aren’t you,” he mumbled, “well, that will soon be remedied.”

He returned the blade swiftly to its sheath once more. Aegnor thought he heard the blade moan at the loss of its freedom.

The sound of laughter from the stairs prompted Carnistir to set down the sword as Aegnor hurriedly began to recover it. They had just placed the last of the coverings over it when a group of about five to six women entered the room led by Hayley. The laughter died almost immediately as Carnistir and Aegnor both stood up. For a moment Aegnor had almost panicked that they had somehow caught a glimpse of the sword and were stunned by it. But when he noticed the how the women’s eyes ran up and down along his torso, he suddenly became aware that he and Carnistir were still shirtless from sparring.

Aegnor’s face became warm and he immediately made for where his bag lay to put the sword away and then slip on his shirt. Carnistir however, drew himself up to his full height and flashed his most charming smile.

“Ladies,” he cooed as he sauntered over, “what a pleasant surprise.”

The group of ladies tittered and giggled as Carnistir preened before them. “I hope Hayley has not been too harsh a task master. She can be such a cruel mistress. Emma, my beauty, something is different about you … a new man perhaps?”

Aegnor listened to the continued sound of laughter and emphatic denials of new lovers as he adjusted his shirt and walked over to where Carnistir’s audience stood. Appraising eyes looked him over as thoroughly as a butcher over a slab of beef. Aegnor smiled politely at the group of women.

“Cirian,” a petite blonde with bright blue eyes and an inviting smile spoke, “who is your friend?”

“Who this?” Carnistir said as he wrapped an arm around Aegnor’s shoulders. “Why this is my dear cousin, once lost but now found. We had been separated for seems like centuries, but now that we have found each other again it is like we were never apart.” Carnistir looked at his captive audience and grinned. Aegnor looked at Carnistir like he had lost his mind. “You’ll have to forgive him for being a bit quiet ladies. Agner here is a bit shy. He always seems to clam up whenever there are pretty girls around.”

This brought a flurry of comments about how attractive shyness is and how that was not a bad trait to have and how he could come out with any one of them if he ever wanted to get out. The women began to move in to surround him and Aegnor suddenly felt like a very tiny worm at the end of a large hook. Aegnor looked over at Carnistir who had conveniently slipped out of the surrounding ring of women and smiled from behind them.

“Ok, that’s enough,” Hayley called out with a reproachful sideways glance at Carnistir, who had the nerve to looked surprised. “Come on everyone, it’s getting late and I have to lock up. Let’s go, let’s go.”

Hayley herded the group of women back towards the stairs. The women reluctantly moved towards the stairs as they called out farewells to Cirian and Agner. As the group made their way down the stairs after Hayley, Aegnor could hear them make comments about how lucky Hayley was to have Cirian and if his cousin was seeing anyone. Aegnor looked at Carnistir.

“You are an ass.”
Carnistir just grinned.

Aegnor turned and walked back over to where his bag with his belongings were and sat down to put on his shoes.

“You’re really not going to ask me, are you.”

Aegnor looked at Carnistir. “What?”

“Do not play dumb Aegnor, it is unbecoming. About her. About the bond. You must have questions. I know you must have questions. Why must you insist on being so bloody stubborn? Just ask.”

Aegnor did have questions. Several questions to be honest. But Aegnor did not believe his refusal to ask Carnistir was out of stubbornness. Carnistir folded his arms across his chest as he looked at Aegnor.

“Has she gotten into your head yet? Unintentionally of course, but still gotten in there. Suddenly acting on your random thoughts or feelings. Has she pulled at you yet? Or perhaps you to her? Finding yourself or her suddenly in the others presence without knowing how you got there? Or perhaps she has answered some questions you had asked yourself in your mind. The bond can be a torrent of emotions and information Aegnor. It will overtake you if you let it. You can’t shut her thoughts out yet, can you? You know that you can’t. Just admit it.”

Aegnor looked down at the half laced shoe in his hand. Carnistir was right of course. Carnistir was infuriating, but he was right.

“I had been thinking of her,” Aegnor began reluctantly, “just casually. Thinking about things from when we were at the cabin and how I wanted to see her, and when I looked up …”

“There she was,” Carnistir finished for him.

“She did not even know how she got there. She had gotten on the train to go back to her apartment, or so she thought. She had gotten on a train alright, not to her apartment, but mine. She was so confused. I should have tried not to think of her after that but I can’t help myself. I am so aware of everything about her. Her feelings can be overwhelming at times, even dizzying. I don’t know how, I have no idea …” Aegnor’s voice trailed off. He had no clue how to control it. All he could do was to bear it.

Carnistir had walked over to him as he spoke till he stood over Aegnor, his arms still folded across his chest. “It is like that in the beginning,” he said thoughtfully, “the constant need for the other. Her fea is a part of yours now, you need her to be complete. And she needs you as well. You will never feel entirely whole again while the other is gone. You will continually pull at the other, needing the other. It has something to do with begetting a child as well, or so they say.”

“Begetting a child?” Aegnor looked up surprised.

“Calm yourself, you have to choose to, both of you. It won’t just happen unless you both wish it. There are ways to control the pull you know. Ways to shut her out, so to speak. Not in a negative way,” Carnistir reassured when Aegnor looked concerned. “The two are one now and you will never be able to shut her out completely. But you can learn to control how much can come across. I can teach you this of course, but it will not be easy, not at first. And it will involve ósanwë.”

Aegnor now gave Carnistir a guarded look. Studied him was perhaps the more appropriate term. What a strange turn of events that brings him here to this point. He did not relish the thought of
opening his mind to Carnistir. The last person he wanted rooting around in his head was Carnistir. It was a precious and sacred thing, ósanwê. Considered a gift by many. Something that must be handled delicately or else you could drive another mad with the influx of information and images. To open himself willingly to Carnistir, to allow Carnistir to see his most intimate thoughts and feelings, was something he would have never have even considered. But then he had never thought he would find Andret again either, much less bond her without her knowledge. As much as it pained him, he needed Carnistir’s help. This was no time for unnecessary pride. And Carnistir would be have to open himself to Aegnor as well in order to help him. Something he had to know of when he offered. And that was no small thing. They would both be vulnerable. And still he offered.

Aegnor finished lacing up his shoe and stood up with a sigh.

“Fine. You’re right. It must be done and it will much more difficult to do without your help. Thank you."

A slow smile crept across Carnistir’s face as Aegnor spoke. “Oh, that looked painful. Do you need to sit back down a moment?”

“Please do not make me regret this,” Aegnor growled.

“Never,” Carnistir soothed. He suddenly clapped his hands and rubbed them together. “Well then, since that is settled, shall we to your place? I do not think Hayley will appreciate seeing us staring into each other’s eyes all night and my place is just a mess.” Carnistir practically skipped across the floor to grab his things. “I’ll go let Hayley know and we will meet downstairs, yes? Good!”

Aegnor watched Carnistir as he bounded up the stairs two at a time and wondered in disbelief to what he had just agreed to.

Andrea fumbled with her keys as she struggled through the doorway of her apartment. It was the first time she had been back since they had returned. She never intended to spend the last three nights at Agner’s flat but somehow she kept finding herself on the train to Soho each time. She simply could not stop herself. She was starting to fear that Agner was going to get sick of her. But every time she walked up, there he would be, smiling as if he were waiting for her all along. And he never seemed to mind. And, to be honest, she wanted to be around him. It just felt … right. As if it was where they both belonged. Or maybe it felt that way because she thought about him all the time. At times she could see him so clearly in her mind that she felt like if she turned around there he would be, standing right next to her. And when they were together, it was as if he knew every part of her. He pulled her to him like he could not get enough and Andrea had to admit that she loved it. She loved feeling so wanted, so desired. It was like she had been waiting for this her whole life.

That was crazy of course. She was still in the honey moon phase of the relationship, so of course everything was perfect. Which was why she insisted on going to her apartment tonight. She had to assert some independence again. That and she had to get a change of clothes. She had been washing and wearing the same underwear for three days. And that is just not right.
She dropped her things on the floor and flopped down on the sofa to sit down. She was already exhausted and she still had to go back to the jeep and get more of her things out and bring them to the apartment. But before she did, she just wanted to sit, just for a second.

“Well, well, well,” a familiar voice called from the narrow hallway that led to her and Kate’s bedrooms. Andrea looked up to see her roommate leaning against the entrance to the hallway, a rather large shit eating grin across her face. “Look who managed to finally drag their ass home. I hope you have a good story to go with that tired look young lady.”

Andrea tried to open her mouth to tell Kate to leave her alone. To tell her that she was just too tired to deal with her at the moment and to come back after she had some rest. But instead, all she could do was return Kate’s shit eating grin with one of her own. That seemed to be to enough for Kate.

“Oh my Gooooood,” Kate squealed as she leapt onto the sofa and on top of Andrea, “where have you been? You have been gone almost a week! It was just supposed to be for the weekend! What happened? Did it go well? You look like it went well! Did you kiss him? Huh? Huh! Did you? Did you? Did he kiss you? Did he? Did he kiss you all over? Did you kiss the naughty parts?”

Andrea laughed and swatted at Kate who was jumping up and down on the sofa all around her. “Omg Kate, really. I just got in the door, you know? Could you give me a second?”

Kate stopped jumping as sat with her knees pulled up against her chest as her chin rested on them and stared at Andrea with wide eyed expectation.

“Yes, we kissed the naughty parts.”

Kate began jumping up and down again as she screamed. “I knew it,” she shouted, “I knew it! You had sex didn’t you didn’t you! You totally slept with him! Was it great? Was it all magical and stuff? Was it everything I imagined it to be?”

Andrea covered her face as she laughed, drumming her feet on the floor, caught up in Kate’s excitement. “Kate, it was amazing. I mean, it was just … amazing. And I mean everything, not just the sex, you know? I mean I was all ready to spend that whole trip pissed at him. But then the cabin and the lake, oh my God the lake.”

“You love him don’t you!” Kate cried as she perched on the arm of the sofa. :You do! You totally do, I can tell. Your going to marry him and I am going to be your maid of honor and if he has a brother and makes him the best man I am going to make out with him.”

“Stop, just stop,” Andrea laughed as she tossed a pillow that Kate batted away effortlessly. “It’s a bit early for that don’t you think?”

“Um no,” Kate replied matter-of-factly as she hugged the pillow Andrea threw at her, “love at first sight baby!”

Andrea laughed again. “Whatever. I am not getting married. Not anytime soon anyway and I seriously doubt he wants to either.”

“Have you asked him?”

“As if!” This time Andrea grabbed a pillow and hit Kate with it. “Will you just let me enjoy this please, without getting caught up in delusions about a nonexistent future okay?”

“Oh it is going to be existent all right, it is totally going to be existent,” Kate squealed once more, jumping on Andrea’s lap. The roommates fell over each other in fits of laughter for a few more
minutes before finally dying down to a low giggle. After a moment, Kate looked over at Andrea.

“Seriously though,” she said, “you really like him don’t you.”

“Kate, I would run away with him tonight if he asked.” Andrea her head in disbelief. Not so much at what she said, but at the fact that she meant every word. She would too. If Agner were to call her this very moment, she would drop everything and just go. It frightened her at just how certain she was of this. But then it was normal to feel this way, in the beginning anyway. Was it not? Everything is always great in the beginning. It was later when the trouble began. No, Andrea thought angrily, I am not going to try to jinx this. Not this time. Andre sighed. “I guess I better put this stuff away and then get the rest.”

“Rest?”

“Yeah, I still have to get things from the jeep. I am just going to drive it around to the front of the building and then unload it and park again. I’m just putting it off because I’m lazy. If only I had some help,” Andrea said as she rested her chin on Kate’s shoulder and gazed up at her with big eyes.

“You do,” Kate said incredulously, “that great strapping hunk of man that is your boyfriend. Call him to help you do it.”

“No! I am trying to stay away for the night. I don’t want him to get sick of me. It took forever for us to get to this point. I’m just trying to be careful you know?”

“Whatever. You two were meant for each other. What could possibly go wrong?”

Andrea stuck out her bottom lip as she looked up at Andrea. “Pleeeeeease?”

“Oh alright,” Kate groaned. “Let me get my shoes on.”

“Thank you, I love you!”

“No you don’t!” Kate called from her bedroom.

Andrea smiled as she sat up. Things were going really well. She was not sure why she always had to look for the negative in everything. Agner was not like the others. He was different. He was special. Besides, he said he loved her. Kate was right, what could go wrong? This time truly was going to be different, Andrea could feel it. She was not going to allow herself to break down with self-doubt. Not this time.

Andrea stood up from the sofa and stretched her arms over her head. With Kate to help her get her things, unpacking would go a lot faster. She turned to walk back towards the kitchen only to be startled as she passed by the window. She looked and saw sitting out on the window ledge was a scrawny black cat with great big yellow eyes and an ear that looked as if something had taken a bite out of it.

“What the hell?” Andrea walked over towards the window, the cat watching her the entire time.

“Okay so, we are going to bring the car around right? I mean, we aren’t going to lug all the stuff from the car here are we? I’m not sure if I’m up for that. What?”

Andrea turned and gave Kate a questioning look as she pointed at the window. “What’s this?”

“Oh him. Yeah he just showed up one day. Just hangs out looking in the window.” Kate walked
over and stood next to Andrea, looking at the cat. “I tried to get him to come in once but all he did was hiss at me. I put a little bowl of water out there for him though. He must belong to someone in the building, I guess.”

“He just hangs out on the window ledge?” Andrea looked back at the cat. Yellow eyes blinked lazily.

“Yup. You ready?”

“Yeah, yeah. Let me get my keys.”

Andrea grabbed her keys as Kate walked over to the door and waited. She opened the door and stepped out into the hallway. Once Kate was out, she turned to close the door and lock it and noticed that the cat was no longer in the window.

“You know, you really should look into getting a parking spot here near the building.” Kate said as she slipped on her jacket. “It would make things so much easier.”

“I told you it is too expensive here. I am thinking I might just take the jeep back to my dad’s anyway and save some money. I always use the train anyway so what’s the point right?”

The two girls continued to chat as they headed towards the elevator and all thoughts of the cat went out of Andrea’s head.
Chapter 18

The rain began to lightly thrum all around them as it pelted the leaves of the tree under which they sheltered. The occasional drop of moisture would find its way through the leaves and onto their heads as the light spattering of showers intensified. It had begun as a soft whispering in the air. The day had been quite beautiful under the bright blue sky. But Aegnor had noticed how the clouds had taken shape, growing taller, darker, faster. They had started back but it was too late and now all that was left was to seek shelter. But the tree would not do. The wind had picked up, not to a full summer gale that is common this time of the year, but enough to cool the air to a chill. Andreth shivered slightly next to him. He had taken his cloak and set it around her shoulders, but that was damp now and would do little for her. He placed his arms around her and pulled her close in an effort to share his warmth and offer some protection from the wind. Or at least that is what he told himself. She moved in willingly, her hand at his breast as her temple rested against his chest. How good she felt against him this way, so close. He could smell the light scent of ginger lilies from her hair and skin. He could hear her heart as it fluttered a rapid rhythm in her chest. He looked down just as her gaze moved up to meet his and thought that his own heart may clench in his chest. Her eyes were bright and hopeful, her lips slightly parted. How he longed to fill the space between.

“Yavanna tits, will you just shut me out already.”

Aegnor looked up to see Carnistir sitting on a low branch on the tree, one leg dangling as his arm rested on the other, a look of complete disgust on his face.

Aegnor glared up at him as the world began to blur …

The wind howled as it bit and tore at his skin. White whipped around him as the cold attempted to squeeze everything to death. The snow was piling up in drifts as it blinded him with ice white dust. He walked bent over against the cold and tried to protect his eyes with his arm. Every so often a random silhouette of a figure hunched over, trudging in the snow would loom into his vision and then vanish, swallowed in white. Suddenly the ground rumbled as air spilt with a deafening crack that rolled and grumbled to silence. Figures began to come together finding each other in the storm for support. They could not stop. If they stopped they would not start again. So many had already been lost that way. Unable to move or becoming mad with despair as they stripped away their coverings and then wandered blindly into the snow as their loved ones wailed helplessly behind them. He had to keep moving. He had to keep his people moving. Aegnor had just turned to the figure next to him and took a small child from the mother’s arm so she could move quickly when the earth roared again, this time accompanied by the sound of screams. Aegnor turned to tell the mother to run but she was gone. It was then that he noticed that all of the huddled figures that had been there only seconds earlier were now gone. The sounds of his people screaming floated on the wind.

“Well this is thoroughly depressing. I’d rather go back to the tree, thank you.”

Carnistir stood at the edge of the ice, looking down into the abyss. The child in Aegnor’s arms began to cry as the world blurred …

“Aren you leaving already my lord?”

Aegnor paused for only a moment from setting his packs on the saddle. He did not need to turn to know whose voice called to him now. It haunted his every step.

“Yes,” he said as he finished fastening the buckles to the pack. “There is business I must attend
“I see,” the voice replied softly from behind him. “Perhaps I could prepare something for you, something to eat to take with you. If you would –”

“No,” he interrupted a bit more brusquely than intended. “No,” he said again, his tone gentler, “do not trouble yourself for I have no time to spare.” He backed his horse from the stall and began to lead it out when she stopped him once more. Just a hand, hesitantly placed upon his arm. He stopped but did not look at her where she stood beside him.

“My lord I … why must … I do not understand why you must, I mean, it is just that I thought … have I done something to offend you?”

He did look at her now. Her hair hung loose about her shoulders and fell in waves down her back. She did not look at him, instead keeping her eyes on the hand that was now on his arm. He placed his hand over hers.

“No my lady. You have never done nor could ever do anything to offend me. That would be impossible.”

She did look at him now. Her eyes were wet and her cheeks flushed. Aegnor felt his breath leave him.

“Then why,” she stopped and struggled for a moment, unable to find the words. “Here.” She thrust a piece of parchment at him. “This is for you. I hope you will read it, while on the trip back.”

Aegnor looked at the parchment in her clenched fist. He did not need to read it to know what it said. But he would not shame her this way. He placed his hand over hers and gently pushed it away.

“I am sorry my lady. I cannot accept this. It would not be proper.”

Aegnor removed her other hand from his arm and moved past her. Andreth flinched as if she had been struck.

He pretended he could not hear the sound of her weeping as he walked away.

“Oh for fuck’s Aegnor,” Carnistir’s voice groused from somewhere around him as the world began to blur …

He was laying on the shores of Alquelond ë, the sun warming his skin as his brothers laughed … as the world blurred …

“Push –”

He spurred his mount forward as the monster before them began to breathe fire … the world blurred …

“Me –”

He drove his sword home, breaking the goblins ribs as he twisted he blade and the creature spat black blood …

“OUT!”
Aegnor released the sword he had embedded in the goblin’s chest and spun around with a snarl, grabbing Carnistir by the throat and slamming him against the wall. The world began to blur …

He sat behind a desk covered in parchments. Tallies of trade through the Blue Mountains with the naugrims. What greedy little bastards they are. Still, a profitable annoyance. There was also correspondence from Himring that needed answers. Maedhros wanted them all to meet at Himring for some urgent meeting. Good luck getting Curufinwë to come when called. And where ever he was Tyelkormo was certain to be close behind. Maedhros really should make an effort to put them both on a leash. They will tarnish the family name. He chuckled at that. He leaned forward to grab his goblet of wine when it happened. It was as if his being, his fea, had been pulled like a bow string, becoming more and more taut, till it could no longer take the stress and finally popped. His heart pounded an irregular beat, sputtering as it struggled to maintain a rhythm. He fell back in his seat and clutched at his chest, gasping for breath. He tried to stand, only to collapse back down against his desk. His vision was fuzzy as he sank to the floor, eventually dropping to his knees.

Something was terribly wrong. He struggled to gather his wits but it was as if something had … as if he had … been torn, ripped, no burned away and now all that was left was some strange hollowness, an emptiness in his being. Everything was suddenly off kilter. He could not focus, he could not think. The sense of loss made him want to weep.

His eyes went wide as the realization struck him, deadlier that any sword.

“She’s gone,” he rasped, struggling for the words, “oh Father of All help me, she’s gone …”

Sobs wracked his body as the world began to blur …

The link snapped between them and Aegnor collapsed back against his chair as Carnistir did the same in his. They sat across from each other in Aegnor’s living room, glowering at each other.

The entire night went this way.

And well into the morning.

It had been sometime since Aegnor had been this exhausted. The last time that could even remotely come close was when they had made the crossing. He closed his eyes to that memory. There was nothing about it worth remembering. And once remembered, there was nothing that did not the dull pain. It was the way with all painful memories of the past since his reawakening. When he was child, he had been told stories of when someone was reawakened in Aman, how all the pain of their past was washed away and their sins forgiven. While the memories would still remain, their penance has been paid and they could live again without remorse.

It had not been that way for Aegnor.

And after last night, he realized it was not that way for Carnistir either.

Perhaps it was because they did not reawaken in Aman, but instead were allowed to return to Arda. And it was not as if he had awoke in the gardens of Nienna, to be nursed once more into life, surrounded by family and loved ones rejoicing in your presence. Instead, it was as if he had just stumbled into being, one moment a shapeless formless wisp fea that pathetically made to run for the light, only to suddenly finding himself physically running and then falling on to the hard ground. He stumbled, as naked as a babe, trying to remember what it was to be a sentient being once more. It had been a humbling experience.

Much like the last several hours.
They did not stop till Aegnor had worked out how to apply what he had learned to the bond. Once that had been accomplished, they had sat in silence across from each other, both seeming to retreat somewhere within. Details were learned tonight. At times, intimate details that both would have preferred never been known. Respite was needed now. Neither of them closed their eyes as they began the restful wanderings their kind could do, walking the endless roads of waking dreams within their minds. It was late afternoon when Carnistir stood up with a sigh. He raked his fingers through long dark hair before walking over to Aegnor’s refrigerator and helping himself to a beverage. He slammed back the amber in one smooth motion and set the empty bottle on the counter while simultaneously opening fridge to grab a second one.

He drank the second bottle at a more moderate pace as he gathered his things.

“Well I am never doing that again,” he said as he pulled on his coat.

Aegnor rubbed at his eyes before running a hand through his hair and around to rub at the back of his neck. “Agreed,” he muttered in response.

Carnistir finished off the second beer and set the empty bottle on the counter next to the first one. “I will call you soon. I would like to find the information we need, hopefully in the next couple of days. I will need to go out into a more rural area though. Somewhere with water. If you have suggestions, they will be welcome.”

Aegnor stood up slowly as he tried to process Carnistir’s words in what remained of his muddled senses. “I may know of a place,” he replied a bit dully while rubbing at his neck.

“Good, good,” Carnistir said absently as he walked towards the elevator, grabbing his helmet and keys on the way.

For a moment Aegnor was almost sad to see him go. In all of Aegnor’s longs years after his return, he had never had anyone who could ever even begin to attempt to understand. Nor had ever found anyone of the Eldar. It was not that Aegnor assumed he was the only one who had returned, he just simply did not wish to think about the possibility of anyone else being out there. Perhaps it was simply so he would not get his hopes up or perhaps it was due to the fact he felt he should suffer alone. He did not know. But what he did know was that he had spent the last several hours reliving memories long gone. Once Carnistir left, he would be alone with the remnants of that pain he had spent centuries pushing away.

“Carnistir …” Aegnor hesitated as Carnistir stopped at the elevator and turned slightly to look over his shoulder. Dark patches were visible under his eyes as he cocked an eyebrow at Aegnor. The light within those eyes, that normally shone hot with the fire of life, seemed … not dull, but subdued. “Thank you.”

Carnistir stared at Aegnor for a moment, face unreadable. The elevator pinged as the doors slid open.

“Don’t mention it,” he finally said as he stepped into the elevator. “Seriously, do not ever mention it. Ever again.”

The elevator doors slid shut.
Andrea stepped off of the train and headed up the stairs to the street. It had been a difficult night for her last night. The dreams that seemed as if they had finally subsided, had come back last night. It was almost as if they were making up for lost time with how relentless they were. When she was not running in one she was crying in another. There was fire all around or was it water? Was she burning or drowning? It was hard to tell now. The dreams had taken on that fuzzy half-forgotten memory that dreams often become upon waking, but there still remained a lingering emotional residue. Even attempting to fall asleep had become a sort of endurance trial as her mind seemed to race with a thousand thoughts. And just when she had finally resigned herself to remaining awake, she drifted off, only waking till the alarm squawked loudly in her ear. As if her head had flipped a switch, the steady stream of images from her unconscious simply stopped.

She was still tired though. Tired enough that she decided to stay at her apartment tonight. Tired enough that she kept feeling as if she had forgotten something all throughout the day. A nagging feeling like she was missing something or left something behind she should not have. It was annoying to say the least, and she kept having to check her bags just to make sure. She had been so exhausted that she had hardly even thought of Agner today, the desire to be around him twenty-four-seven having finally been dulled due to lack of sleep. It was not a negative thing though. Andrea did not want to lose herself in someone else. It was important that she maintain some independence, some reminders that she is capable on her own. She would get some work done tonight, maybe even call up Hayley to set up a workout time. She had to think of herself as well.

As she rounded the sidewalk a sound caught her attention. She walked along the side of the building to where the dumpsters sat to see two cats, one black and the other white with their backs arched and hair raised. Their low guttural growls would suddenly raise to almost earsplitting screams before dropping back down again. As she came closer Andrea realized that it was the scrawny little black cat with the nick in it’s’ ear that sat in the window, and it was not doing well. The white one, who did not look scrawny in the least, had it backed into a corner, hunched over in a protective crouch. And upon an even closer inspection Andrea could see why. Between the two cats was a tiny little kitten, its eyes barely even open. Behind the black cat were four more little babies, their mewling drowned out by the screeching of the other two. It seemed to Andrea that they were fighting over the kittens, and indeed every time the black one made a move towards the kitten in the middle the white one would rear up, its growls becoming more piercing, forcing the black one back.

Andrea was not certain which cat the kittens belonged too. What she was certain of though, was that she did not like the white one. Not one bit. It was bigger, obviously stronger and, as far as Andrea was concerned, a bully.

“Hey!” she shouted, clapping her hands loudly as she approached. “Hey! Go on! Get out of here, go on!”

Two sets of eyes turned towards Andrea, completely unimpressed, and looked at her as if irritated by her very existence. The white one blinked at her slowly as it leveled vivid green eyes on her. A deep set emerald green that seemed unnaturally bright. The stare was shrewd and unflinching. A penetrating gaze that left Andrea feeling as if she were naked and exposed. She did not like that feeling. Almost without thinking Andrea reached down and grabbed an empty can from the ground and threw it at the white cat. The cat never even flinched as the can hit the ground next to it. It watched the can as it bounced and rolled under the dumpster before returning that cold malevolent gaze back on her.

Don’t be ridiculous, she thought, it’s a goddamn cat. Just walk up and scare it off.
And yet Andrea just stood there, unwilling or unable to accept the dare that was in those green eyes. It was the cat that broke the gaze and walked unconcernedly over to the kitten, picked it up by the scruff of it’s neck and sauntered off. Andrea finally blinked.

*Did I just lose a stare down with a cat?*

With a shake of her head she turned back to where the kittens were only to find the black cat was now gone as well. Her kittens were still there, three squirming and mewling little balls of fur, but no momma.

“Nice,” she muttered as she squatted down in front of the kittens. *Now what.*

She could leave them here. Surely the momma cat would be back for her babies. Unless the momma cat was the white one. In which case Andrea was not sure if she wanted to leave the babies for her. *Now that’s just spiteful,* she thought with a sigh. But what if the mother did not come back. What if they were simply abandoned? It was supposed to get cold tonight. What if the mother never returned and they froze to death? Or worse, what if there were rats? If the cold did not finish the little fuzzies off then the rats were certain too.

“I can’t believe I am doing this,” she groaned as she pulled her hat off her head and bundled the three little kittens in it.

Kate had practically squealed with delight upon seeing the kittens and after a quick Google search, ran out to the corner store to buy baby formula and eye droppers to feed them with. She now sat on the floor of Andrea’s room, cradling one of the kittens, a little grey one, as it ate greedily from the dropper. Andrea sat cross legged on her bed feeding one kitten while the other slept on her lap.

“Oh look at the hungry little furbabies,” Kate cooed. “Just look at that little tummy get fat. You so hungry, aren’t you? Aren’t you? Yes you are, you are. Precious little Sheba.”

“Sheba?”

“Yes Sheba, that is her name,” Kate said matter-of-factly as she set the dropper down and wiped at the kitten’s face with a towel. “Her name is Sheba because she is a little queen.”

“Ah,” replied Andrea. “And what if Sheba turns out to be a boy?”

“Can still be a queen,” Kate shrugged. “I’ve named the other two.”

“Oh really.”

“Yup. The one you’re holding is Pharoh,” Kate set down the rag and held the newly christened Sheba’s nose up to hers, “because every queen needs her king, isn’t that right? And the one in your lap is Ralph.”

“Ralph?”

“Well yeah, I mean look at him.”

Andrea looked down at her lap at the little black and white kitten. He lay on his back, his legs splayed out in four different directions into the air. Andrea smiled. “Yeah ok.”

“So the mom just abandoned them?”

“I guess,” Andrea shrugged. “I don’t know. I just didn’t see another cat around so …”
“What about the white cat?”

Andrea shook her head. “I don’t think that one is the mom.”

“But you said it took off with one.”

“I know but …” Andrea thought about how the white cat had stared at her. “I don’t know why I just don’t think it was.”

“Poor sweet abandoned little baby,” Kate cooed to the newly dubbed Sheba. “Too bad they can’t stay here.”


“Hello, because of the deposit. I think it is like 200 per pet and the litter. I don’t want to change it.”

“You just spent the last hour buying food and feeding and baby talking all over them,” Andrea said incredulously.

“I do the same thing for Gabe and you don’t see him moving in do you?” Kate replied dismissively. “Besides, it’s not like I don’t like animals. It’s that I don’t like owning animals, or being responsible for animals, or cleaning up after animals, or paying for animals.”

“Ok, ok, I get it. So now what.”

“We take them to a shelter?”

Andrea grimaced. “That seems so mean.”

Oh please. Just look at these little babies. There is no way they are not going to be adopted. That is not going to be a problem. What is going to be a problem though, is where they are going to stay tonight. Gabe’s allergic.

Sounds like to me Gabe is the one with the problem then.

Andrea please. I know you don’t like him but please, just do this for me? Come on, you’ve got your perfect guy. Let me have my, semi-ok, sometime plaything guy. Hey maybe Agner could watch them.

I don’t know …

Just till tomorrow, when we can take them to the shelter. Surely he would for one night.

Andrea looked down at the sleeping balls of fluff in her lap. She had not planned on seeing him tonight but upon hearing his name, that familiar warm sensation ran through her and she felt a gentle tug of need from within. *I guess I miss him after all,* she thought as she scratched Ralph under the chin. Ralph simply yawned and stretched out a tiny paw. She had to admit, it felt good to lay next to him at night. It was comforting in a way she had not felt since she was little. She did miss him. And for a moment she was almost overwhelmed with the sudden need to see him, to feel the warmth of him. A longing for him to come to her upon realizing that part of the world has not moved since his absence.

“I’m sure if you ask him he’ll say yes.”

I have to ask him first.
As if on cue, Andrea’s phone began to chirp in her bag. Kate rummaged through the bag and upon pulling it out, she smiled widely. “Make sure you ask him if his ears are burning.”

Andrea made a face at Kate as she took the phone to see Agner’s name lit up across the screen. She pressed accept and put the phone to her ear. “I was just thinking about you.”

“Andrea?” Agner asked.

“Fortunate timing then,” Agner replied.

“I have heard it is everything,” Andrea laughed. “I’m glad you called, I kind of need your help with something.”

“Is anything wrong?”

“No, no,” she reassured, “just need a favor.”

“This is fortunate timing then. I also have a favor to ask of you.”

“Perfect! Wait, what do need from me?”

“I’ll tell you when I get upstairs.”

“Upstairs?”

“I happened to be over on this end of the city and thought I would stop by … I hope that was all right …”

“Yes, yes of course. Of course it is.”

“I just need you to buzz me in.”

“Yes, ok! I am getting the door right now,” Andrea jumped up causing the two sleeping kittens to tumble out of her lap.

“Hey!” exclaimed Kate.

“Oh sorry! Sorry!” Andrea gently picked up the kittens and gave them to an indignant Kate who began to make cooing noises as she glared at Andrea. Andrea paid her no mind as she ran to the living room and hit the buzzer for the door. “There. Are you in?”

“I will be up in a moment,” answered Agner.

“Great, see you in a few. Bye.” Andrea ended the call and looked around at the random things strewn about the apartment. “Shit.” She immediately began to run around the apartment, gathering up the pieces of clothing and papers that were laying out. “Shit!” she cursed again as she took a bundle of clothes and looked around frantically for somewhere to stash them before settling on throwing them in Kate’s room and shutting the door. “Shit! I mean really? Would it kill you to put a few things away every once and awhile.” Andrea grabbed a pile of papers and stacked them together in a make-shift pile and then stuffed them under the sofa. “I mean, you don’t have to pick up everything, just somethings you know?” She then grabbed the empty glasses that were scattered across the tables and tossed them in to the sink. “I know that I’m not the neatest person in the world either, you know? I just think we should start to try picking up a little more, you know, in case of company or something. Right?”

Kate said nothing as she stood leaning against the entrance to Andrea’s room and nuzzled a kitten with her cheek as she watched Andrea run the apartment with an amused little smile on her face.
Andrea had stopped her flurry for a moment to survey the room when there was a light tapping on the door. An invisible line was suddenly tugging at her core.

She opened the door and did not even hesitate before embracing him, wrapping her arms around his neck. For a moment she stood there, taking in the heat of him. He smelled like sage and sun warmed spices fresh from the earth. She buried her nose in the crook of his throat and inhaled deeply, wanting to taste him on the back of her tongue. She felt his hands move around her waist to the small of her back and she turned her face up to his. As his lips parted hers she wondered how she could have ever stayed away from him for any amount of time. What had been the purpose? What was the point? Tongues flicked past teeth and she felt herself becoming heady, every touch intoxicating to her. He pulled his lips reluctantly from hers and Andrea thought she heard a low growl from somewhere. Had that been her?

“Hello,” Agner’s voice whispered low and throaty. Andrea felt her face begin to burn beneath his gaze. “Perhaps we should go inside?”

She blinked, and suddenly her world swung back into focus again. The glare of the bright florescent lights in the hallway was blinding. Andrea was grateful no one was around. Her face grew even hotter.

“Yeah,” she laughed embarrassedly. What is wrong with me, she thought. It’s only been a day! Andrea quickly dropped her arms back to her sides only to have Agner grab her hand and lace his fingers with hers, causing her embarrassment to subside somewhat.

They entered the apartment and Andrea closed the door behind them. Once the door was shut, Agner gently pulled Andrea to him once more and smiled down at her.

“So what brings you to this part of town?” she asked with a grin of her own.

“I was not aware I needed a reason,” he replied.

“You don’t,” Andrea laughed, “I was just curious. You’re a bit far from your stomping ground.”

“I stomp where you stomp,” he said as he leaned in, “for as long as you allow me.”

Agner’s lips met hers and she felt the familiar dizziness take over. Her longing for him came at her in waves and she could feel herself drowning.

“Ew yuck!”

Agner looked up while Andrea looked over her shoulder with a scowl as Kate strolled into the room.

“Why Mr. Aeluin,” Kate exclaimed in mock surprise, “what a pleasant surprise. Whatever are you doing here?”

Andrea rolled her eyes but Agner smiled. “I am sorry to disturb you Ms. Macey. I hope you do not mind my intrusion to your space.”

“Oh by all means, intrude away,” Kate grinned as she sat down on the sofa. “And just Kate please, I think we can move on to a first name basis now.”

“I could not agree more,” Agner chuckled.

Andrea gave little groan and pulled herself from Agner’s arms reluctantly. “Are you thirsty? Can I
get you something,” Andrea called over her shoulder as she walked around the counter and into the kitchen area. Agner shook his head as he followed her and leaned against the counter.

“No, thank you. I was hoping that you might join me for dinner though.”

“Oh? You came all the way over here to ask me to dinner?”

“I just so happened to be in this area and thought I would stop by. Not that I wouldn’t come all the way over here to ask you of course.”

“Of course,” Andrea laughed. “I guess dinner wouldn’t be a bad idea.”

“Good.” Agner said pleased. He turned around to look at Kate. “You are welcome to join us if you like …”

“Oh, I think I’ll pass this time,” Kate answered from the sofa. “I have plans anyway.”

Andrea walked from behind the counter and began to gather her things, shooting Kate a dirty look from the corner of her eye. “So, were you down here for work?”

“Ah no, not exactly.”

Andrea gave him a curious look. “Not exactly?”

“No,” Agner sighed, “although one might argue it was arduous. I was meeting Cirian.”

“Your cousin?”

“Cousin?” Kate squeaked from the sofa. “You have a cousin? Here in the city? Is he going to dinner too? Because I might be free after all.”

“Really Kate,” Andrea said flatly, “really?”

Agner smiled. “No Kate, he will not be going to dinner too.”

“Oh … yeah I’m busy.”

Andrea walked over to where Kate sat and snatched her jacket from underneath her roommate with an abrupt yank and a disapproving look. Kate blinked innocently.

“Ok, I’m ready if you are,” Andrea called out slipping on her coat.

“Wait,” Kate suddenly exclaimed, “wait, wait! Just a minute.” She jumped up from the sofa and ran into the other room, returning shortly with a box in her hands. She handed the box to Andrea. “You almost forgot this.”

“It couldn’t wait till after dinner?” Andrea asked.

Agner walked up behind her and looked curiously at the box. “What’s this?”

“Ah yeah this. This is the favor I was going to ask you.” Andrea opened the box.

Agner looked very confused. “Kittens?”

“Yeah, I found them around the side of the building. They were abandoned, at least I think they were and I need to find them a home. But we can’t keep them here because of the deposit and
Agner looked at Andrea. “Abandoned?”

“Yes. I think their mom is this black cat who used to hang out in the widow all the time but now we haven’t seen her in a while so –”

“A cat in the window,” Agner interrupted.

“Yeah. A little black one. She just showed up one day and started hanging out in the window.”

“When.”

“Um, I’m not sure. Last week maybe? Anyway, the kittens. We can’t keep them here, the deposit is too much. I want to take them to a no-kill shelter but I’m not sure where one is in the city. I just need a couple of days to find one and I was hoping they could stay at your place till I do. I will get everything they need and clean up so you don’t have too, I promise. You won’t even notice they are there. So can they stay? With you? Agner?”

When Agner did not answer she looked up to see him staring intently down at the box. His face was void of expression but Andrea could not help but think he was troubled. No, she was certain he was troubled. Maybe he did not like cats. Maybe he saw this as an imposition. Perhaps he thought she was trying to dump them on him. Had she over stepped?

“Hey, don’t worry about it,” she said hastily. “They should be fine here for the night. We can keep them in my room where they won’t bother anybody.”

Andrea turned to take the box to her room when Agner stopped her. “No,” he said. “It will be fine. I don’t mind.”

“No, I shouldn’t have asked. Taking in animals can be a pain. I found them, I will take care of them. Really, it is not a big deal.”

“Andrea, I am happy to look after them … on one condition. That you will stay with me while I do. Agreed?”

Andrea felt her concern slowly ebb from her body as she smiled. “If you wanted me to stay at your place, all you had to do was ask.”

“I thought I just did,” he replied.

“You guys aren’t going to start making out again are you,” Kate groaned in the back ground. “How about I just pack your bag for you.”

Andrea let out a slow controlled sigh. “Just give me a second ok?”

“I will take the cargo downstairs and bring the car around.” Agner brushed a quick kiss across her cheek before taking the box from her hands and leaving the apartment.

She watched him go. She realized in that moment that she hated watching him leave. It was as if she had been filled and did not realize it until he was gone and the absence rushed back in. It was silly of course. Andrea had always prided herself on her ability to be alone. In truth she had liked being on her own better than anything else. But now, things were different. She was different. Andrea found she could not give up on love. Not this time. Not with him. From their first kiss she had felt something melt inside her that hurt in the most exquisite way. All longing and dreams and...
sweet anguish. All the secrets that slept within her had come awake. Everything was transformed now, enchanted. Everything made sense, when she was with him.

This was not what she had intended tonight. She had intended to stay away, but for what? Why did she wish to ride that tension between longing and aloneness any longer? No, this was not what she intended, but she did not care. She was going to give all of herself this time, wholly and completely. It was worth it. Being with him was right no matter the risk.

Agner waited outside his car in front of Andrea’s building. His eyes scanned the streets as he opened himself to the sounds of the city. He was being paranoid. He had to be. It was just a coincidence that some stray cat had wandered to Andrea’s window. There were stray cats all over the city, this one is no different. His eyes darted to the dark corners of the building. Nothing could escape his sight, not the sight of the Eldar. And yet Agner felt as if he were missing something.
Chapter 19

Aegnor slowly paced the length of the great hall. A fortnight has passed since they had come to Doriath but they had not been permitted to cross within the borders till three days ago. And once in they were made to wait in the great halls of Menegroth at the king’s leisure. Finrod had warned that this may the case when they arrived and had advised patience for their part. It will not be easy for the king to accept so many new great princes and lords in his realm. Patience was key.

Aegnor had to admit that Menegroth was could quite impressive. The Noldo in him could not help but admire the skill involved, made all the more impressive being done by Moriquendi. Their ability to shape the stone could almost be on par with more than a few students of Aulë. The room he stood in was a display of opulence. Gold and mithril winked and glittered along the walls lining statues and figures carved within the stone walls, looking as if it had been woven within. Rich murals were draped along the walkways, many telling the story of the King and his Queen. Or perhaps the Queen and her King was more appropriate since it seemed it was her favor that was necessary to be granted an audience.

Aegnor silently chided his arrogance. The face that they had not only survived but thrived here in the wilds for as long and as well as they have with the constant threat and evils of Morgoth was no small feat. He has led the people well, even without the guidance of the Ainur. But then, they did have the gift of their Queen to guide them properly as well. It was more than likely the Queen was the reason they were far more refined than their Laiquendi cousins.

And she was a sight to behold.

Aegnor had only been in her presence for a brief time when they first came to the hall, but it was something he would remember. It had been said that out of all the Maia who dwelt in the gardens of Lorien, there were none as fair as Melian. Upon seeing her, Aegnor knew this to be true. She taught the nightingale their song and may have even inspired Yavanna herself. She had stood on the dais above them next to Thingol, her hand lay lightly atop his as they approached. Long midnight black hair fell about her shoulders, framing delicate features and skin paler that moonlight on the water. But it was her eyes that struck at Aegnor the most, for he could see the light of Aman within. An ancient wisdom and infinite knowledge. A light that not even the King had.

It was not till the doors of the great hall slowly closed with a great thud, separating him from his brother and the Queen’s gaze that he realized he had noticed nothing else. Now, with the great gilded doors shuttered between him and his brother, it seemed to him that her gaze had held a coldness as well. A calculating coldness, one that studied, weighed and measured.

Aegnor shook his head and pushed back the wave of paranoia. It was something he found himself doing a lot as of late. Ever since they had arrived. Ever since the crossing. He fought the urge to shiver and turned his attention back to the door. Besides it was not fair for him to judge the Queen so harshly. All of the Maia were a bit quirky in their own strange way. Was it really that surprising that she was not that different?

The thick wooden doors stood tall and imposing before him. Angrod had been in there for quite a while. Although it was hard to tell the time within these halls. Aegnor had to admit that being within the ground and away from the sky was more than just a little disconcerting. He could not help but wonder if he would be stranded out here, waiting for an indeterminate amount of time, much like how Thingol’s people had waited for him all those ages ago.

Aegnor had just set himself down on one of the ornate gold benches that lined the hall when the
doors began to slowly swing open. Angrod walked through the great doors and over to where Aegnor was now standing.

“It is done. Let us be off,” he said, never breaking his stride.

Aegnor spared a quick glance back at the doors as they closed once more before walking quickly after his brother.

“Well?” he asked once he had caught up. “What was said?”

“We have been given leave to dwell in Hithlum and Dorthonion and the lands east of Doriath that are still empty and wild. But no lord of the Noldor may claim dominion over any of the peoples that are already living there nor restrain their freedoms in anyway.”

“That is quite generous … right?” Aegnor hesitated. Something in Angrod’s expression troubled him.

“None are allowed entry to Doriath save those he deems as guest or in great need. He is the Lord of Beleriand and we are to acknowledge that.”

“Understandable,” Aegnor said with a nod, “and still quite generous considering all that has happened …”

As they came to the Grand Entrance to the Great Hall, Angrod came to an abrupt halt. Aegnor stumbled slightly to avoid running into his brother.

“I said nothing of Alqualondë, the exile, nor the oath.”

Aegnor stood there stunned. “That is no small detail brother,” he finally said.

Angrod sighed and turned to Aegnor. “That is done and past. We have moved on from that. Maedhros has more than made amends, for their sins and their father’s. All griefs are now forgiven, therefore there is no reason to dwell.”

Aegnor listened as his brother spoke. He could hear in Angrod’s voice that he believed this. And perhaps he was right. Maedhros had abdicated the crown in favor of Fingolfin, waiving his claim in reparations and thanks. A righteous act and proper. And had not Fingolfin himself said no grievance lay between them and that their people were one again?

He supposed that he would just have to make sure there would be no discord. Of course, if there were to be discord, it would not be from his House or the House of Fingolfin.

No, he would not go into this in the negative before they began. This was to be a new start. They would all have their own realm from which to rule. Certainly that would satisfy even the most unruly of his cousins. Angrod was right. There was no longer a reason to dwell.

“Of course,” he replied reassuringly to Angrod. “Of course it is as you say.”

Some of the tension in his brother seemed to ease slightly, as if he needed some confirmation that he had indeed done right. Angrod had always been true and wise of heart. This was right.

And yet the eyes of Melian still haunted him.
Andrea set the kitten down in the box. It mewedled in protest for several seconds before burying its face against its siblings. She lay the blanket over them for warmth and turned. Agner sat up in the bed clicking away at his laptop. His long legs were stretched out before him, one foot crossed over the other as he typed. He was shirtless, in nothing but his jeans. But that was partly her fault since she was the one who was currently wearing his shirt.

His hair sat mussed atop his head, again something she was responsible for. A lock of hair was casually tucked behind an angled ear. She wondered how she could have ever thought that strange. Had she felt that way at one time? Not that it mattered any more. She could not imagine him any other way. It was all a part of the perfection for her. It was all too easy for her to get lost for hours just staring at him. The line of his jaw, the soft spot at the base of his throat, the gentle rise and fall of his chest. Would she ever tire of it she wondered. No, she would not. It was far more likely that he would tire of her first.

Agner looked up at her, the clicking on the keyboard coming to an abrupt stop. She felt a familiar rush of heat race throughout her body when he looked at her. Her emotions tended to ball up into a tight knot that she would have to tamp down in the back of her head whenever he looked at her that way. Whenever he looked at her in any way, to be honest. She would become so suddenly aware of him at times that she was certain she could find him no matter what the distance was between them.

Agner reached up and slowly closed the laptop before setting it on the side table next to the bed. When that was done, he sat back and rested his hands, fingers laced together across his chest and smiled.

Andrea could feel her face become warm. She had been standing there staring at him as if he were some piece of meat. She really was becoming pathetic. Andrea grinned and hopped onto the bed. She tucked her body up against his and nuzzled her face against his neck as he wrapped an arm around her.

“Careful now,” he chuckled and adjusted slightly against her.

“Sorry,” she mumbled against his throat. She entangled a leg around his in an attempt to sink even deeper into his warmth.

“Your charges are settled for the night?”

“Mmm,” she sighed. His heart set a nice rhythm for her to relax to. She closed her eyes as Agner threaded her hair through his fingers.

“You could just keep them.”

“Mmm?”

“The kittens,” Agner repeated, “you could just keep them.”

“Ah, not likely. Kate isn’t really into the idea. Besides, we would have to pay a deposit and all that hassle.”

“I see,” Agner said as he curled a strand of her hair around his finger. “You could move.”

Andrea gave a little laugh. “You make it sound so easy.”

“It’s not?” Agner asked.
Andrea tilted her head slightly so she could look up at Agner with half lidded eyes. “No it’s not. It’s not like housing is at a premium around here. And no matter where you go there is some sort of deposit.”

“No here.”

Andrea blinked. “Here?”

“Yes here,” Agner met Andrea’s gaze, “there is no deposit, no security fees, plenty of space. You could have all the kittens you like. No charge.”

“Agner I couldn’t live here,” Andrea laughed. “I mean, I just can’t –”

“Why not?” he interrupted. “It’s not as if I am lacking for space. It would be a bit longer trek for you to campus of course but I think it could be managed. You could have your own room if you wish it, although I have to admit I was hoping you would stay in this one.”

Andrea could only stare at Agner, his eyes kept her from looking anywhere else. He wanted this. This was no empty offer, he meant what he said. And, in truth, Andrea wanted it as well. She need to be near him would overwhelm her at times. He soothed her, it was as if nothing really matter and it all made sense. It was an absurd thought of course. Things like this did not happen.

Did they?

“I don’t know Agner. I mean I would have to buy my way out of my lease. Not to mention losing all of my utilities and security deposit. Not to mention the parking space I rent. And then there is Kate. I mean, what about her? I can’t just leave her like that. There is no way she would be able to afford that place on her own.”

Agner had simply watched her as she rambled, his bright grey eyes never left her face. But Andrea could feel the subtle change in his demeanor, the slight stiffening of his person. The little ball of emotion in the back of her head seemed to pulse slightly with anxiety. She had not been her intention to hurt him. She sat up, turning her body so that she sat on her knees, facing him on the bed.

“Don’t get me wrong Agner. I would love to stay here, with you, in your gorgeous little brownstone. It’s just that, well … I just think that I need to have a place of my own. A place I can go, you know, in case we get sick of each other or something.” Andrea had laughed as she said that last part but it had only been an attempt to hide the fact that she struggled with the urge to beg he would never get sick of her.

Agner sat up, his bright eyes still locked on hers, he cupped her face in his hands.

“Andrea, I will never grow tired of you.” He leaned in and kissed the corners of her mouth. “Keep your place,” he kissed both of her cheeks, “and stay here whenever you wish or,” he began to leave a trail of kissed down the side of her neck as he pulled her to him, “stay at least six nights of the week.”

“Only six?” Andrea said with a low throaty laugh as she allowed Agner to pull her on top of him. It was hard to think while he kissed her into a stupor. He rolled her over him to where they lay facing each other on their sides as he worked his mouth down her neck. She wrestled her thoughts together.

“At least,” Agner repeated, his voice low and his breath warm on her skin.
“Hey,” Andrea found her body involuntarily arching to his touch, “was that what you wanted to ask me?”

“What?” Agner’s voice sounded muffled from where left a line of kisses along her collar bone while his hand traced lazy circles along the inside of Andrea’s thigh.

“Moving in with you. When you came over you said you had a favor to ask. Was that it?”

Agner stopped kissing her then as he leaned his head against his hand to look at her where she lay, his hand continued to draw along her legs causing her skin to prickle.

“Ah, no. That was not what I was going to ask,” he spoke as if reminded of something tedious that needed doing. “I was going to ask about your cabin.”

“The cabin,” she practically sighed. The light tracing of his fingers along her skin reducing her coherency by the second.

“Yes. I was wondering if it might be possible to use it, briefly, one weekend.”

“Hey, that’s a great idea,” Andrea suddenly perked up, her eyes going wide. “I could take one of the kittens to the farm. Carolyn has been saying that she needs one for the barn. This is perfect! I’ll call her right now.”

Andrea moved to jump off the bed only to be halted by Agner’s hand on her arm.

“Actually, I need to go alone. Well not alone, but without you. Not because I do not want you there. I do, very much. But I was going to go … with my cousin. Cirian.”

Andrea looked at Agner, her brows arching. “Your cousin?”

“We would not be there long. We would hardly be there at all actually. Just more of a stopover really. A sort home base, if you will. You remember I had told you he had asked for my help well … I decided to help him.”

“Your cousin,” Andrea repeated as she considered Agner thoughtfully. “I think that is a good idea.”

“You do?”

“Yes, I do.” Andrea layed back down on her side and looked at him. “I mean, you hardly ever talk about your family, even though I know you miss them. And now, after however long you just happen to run into your cousin. Maybe this was meant to be. And while I am not so sure if this cousin is the best one to reconnect with, I still think you should reconnect.” She reached up and tucked a lock of hair behind his ear. “You miss your family, don’t you?”

“Yes,” he whispered.

“Then go,” she whispered back. It was her turn now to kiss him. A light, feathery brushing of her lips against his as she spoke. “Help out your cousin and find your family again.” She traced her finger along the line of his jaw. “Just make sure you don’t trash the place and,” Andrea grinned, “no girls.”

Agner turned his face into her palm and planted a kiss in its curvature. “Only you. There will only ever be you.”

Andrea felt her body react to his mouth against her palm. He had that way about him. The most
banal of gestures could provoke a reaction. He meant what he said of course. She knew he meant every word with every ounce of her being, but as to how or why she could not say. It was difficult to understand. Almost as difficult as understanding just what made her so special to him.

Agner pulled her to him suddenly and rolled, taking Andrea with him until she lay full under him. His eyes burned with that fire that she had come to know so well. The one that threatened to consume her.

“Why do you continue to believe yourself unworthy?” Agner asked, his voice a low whisper.

An annoying trick of his, knowing just what she was thinking. Her hand wandered up his shoulder and up his neck till it rested at the back of his head, twining her fingers in his hair. A familiar heat began to simmer restlessly in her veins.

“Oh I’m worthy alright,” her own voice a low purr. “I just never knew I could be worthy of the most wonderful man ever.”

Agner blinked and his eyes became dark. “Andrea, there is something I need to tell you …”

But as Agner spoke, Andrea shifted as well. Her thighs opened so that Agner sank against her. He gasped and stilled as they both became aware of his body’s reaction to her. Andrea smiled. He may be able to read her well but she still had her own little tricks as well. She began to track kisses up his neck to his ear and then along his jaw as her fingers traced his ribs.

“Andrea …” Agner gasped. He groaned low in his throat as her mouth captured his.

Yes. She certainly had her own little tricks. She grasped him them pulling him in so deep within that neither of them knew where one ends and the other begins.

Aegnor had risen that morning with Andrea as she left for campus. He had offered to take her but she insisted on the subway, finding the time it took on the train an opportunity to relax before the hustle of the day. She could sit, listen to her music and read. It was easy to lose one’s self on the commute. Something she did not mind.

He had kissed her goodbye, promising to see after the kittens as she promised to return that evening. After a quick stop at her place to retrieve a few things first. It would be a lie to say that Aegnor was not disappointed at her choice not to move in with him. But then, he supposed it made sense as well. Andrea was not pressed by time in the same manner than he was. A funny thing to say about one who is immortal, but time moved differently for Aegnor. For her, she had her entire life ahead of her but for him it was a mere blink in time. His need to maximize every moment was making him desperate. While he may have found the spirit of Andreth within Andrea, Andrea was still a woman of this time. Capable of prioritizing her life and needs accordingly with her independence. He had to tread carefully. This was not a woman who needed his protection. Indeed, push her hard enough and this could become a woman who did not need him.

The very thought chilled him to the bone.

He had to talk to her and it had to be soon. If only her methods of distraction were not so … effective.

He walked across living area of his apartment to where the cardboard box sat. Midmorning sunlight poured through the windows and into the box where three little fat mewing kittens
scrambled over each other in their attempt to get out. Not quite big enough to climb out and yet not small enough to remain cooped up in a box with a blanket. Aegnor reached down and grabbed the black and white one, - Ralph was it? -, by the scruff of the neck and studied him.

“What on earth do you have?”

Aegnor looked up to see Carnistir already halfway through his window. He scowled at his cousin.

“I have a proper entrance you know,” he huffed a bit too peevishly for his taste.

“You have an elevator, a private one I might add. One that I do not have a key too. Are you planning to give me one?”

“No,” Aegnor flatly replied.

“Then I do what I must,” Carnistir shrugged. He climbed the rest of the way in and closed the window behind him. “Besides, I did tell you to start locking these things. The city can be dangerous Aegnor, heavens know who might be walking the streets.”

Aegnor gave a little snort as he tucked the kitten into the crook of his arm. “We are set to use the cabin if we wish, although I must admit I do not know why. We would be perfectly fine to stay outside in the rough.”

“Oh we will,” Carnister sighed as he shrugged out of his jacket, “but I must admit that I have become accustomed to the convenience of a readily warm shower. This age has spoiled me that way.” He plopped down on the sofa and set his feet up on the table, one large black boot crossed over the other. “Well?”

Aegnor glared at his cousin’s feet on his table. “Well what,” he snapped back.

If Carnistir was bothered he did not show it. He simply pointed at the tiny black and white kitten.

“It is a kitten Carnistir,” Aegnor grumbled as he set little Ralph gently back in the box.

“I can see it is a kitten,” Carnistir deadpanned, “what are you doing with it?”

“I am not doing anything with it,” Aegnor sighed as he straightened. “Andrea found them. Apparently a stray cat has started hanging around her apartment. For whatever reason it abandoned its kittens and she took them in.”

As Aegnor spoke Carnistir’s gaze narrowed. He stood up suddenly and crossed over to where Aegnor stood study the box and its occupants.

“How very altruistic of her,” he replied.

Aegnor felt a cold chill travel up his spine as his cousin peered intently at the box. “Coincidence?” Aegnor asked, looking at Carnistir.

“I don’t know,” Carnistir answered after a moment with a shake of his head. “It could be but it would be best, I think, to assume not. This changes things.”

The tiny chill Aegnor had felt earlier sparked into dread, building quickly within him. “What do you mean Carnistir,” he growled, stepping closer to his cousin. “Is Andrea in some sort of danger now? She should not even be involved. Just what does it change?”

“I said I don’t know,” Carnistir snapped, “it may be nothing or it could be something. The only
thing it changes for me is the time line. We should go now.”

“Now?”

“Yes now,” Carnistir shot back. “Do you have somewhere else to be? Today at least. Hopefully
find what we need and get back as soon as possible.”

“And just what are we looking for?” Aegnor demanded.

“We will know when we get there.”

Aegnor had been quite put out by Carnistir’s overly dramatic and annoyingly cryptic reply, but felt
the sooner they were done with this the better.

Andrea had been somewhat surprised at their haste but had told him where he could find a key and
reminded him once again that no girls were allowed.

“I have called ahead and let Ms. Carolyn know you would be bringing a kitten by;” she had told
him after he had come by to see her on campus. “She’ll be expecting you.”

“Andrea,” Aegnor took her hand and pulled her close to him, “when I return, there is something
that I really must discuss with you. Something that I need to tell you. It is important.”

Aegnor had masked the bond. Not an easy task with how close she was to him but he could not
trust his emotions not to betray his fear. He was resolved to tell her the truth of who he is,
regardless of the cost. His love for her demanded it be so. To lie to her in this way was heresy of
the highest order. The trusting way she looked at him only drove it home all the more.

She had been amused when he had insisted that she stay at his place while he was gone. He told
her that Kate was more than welcome to come and stay with her if she would like and if Kate could
not then perhaps she could call Carnistir’s, no Cirian’s, much better half Hayley. Andrea had been
surprised to find that Hayley and Cirian were a couple while Aegnor had been surprised he had
forgotten to mention it.

They had arrived at the cabin in the late hours of the night, or the wee hours of the morning,
depending on how you looked at it. They had taken Carnistir’s Land Rover after Carnistir had
laughed himself to tears at the sight of Aegnor’s Tesla. It was dawn by the time they finished
dropping off the belongings Aegnor had brought with him so that Andrea would not think it
strange that he was heading into the mountain trails with nothing but a blanket roll. The cool
mountain air would not affect him or Carnistir the way it would those of Men. All they truly
needed was perhaps a sleeping bag for comfort and provisions for a fire. One would question if
they did not see the necessary coats and boots for hiking in the outdoors.

Once the sun was up fully they made their way in the Rover to the Gadsden’s to drop off the small
orange kitten. Mrs. Gadsden had been surprised to see them so early, but pleasantly invited them in
for coffee or tea. It had been Carnistir who had taken her hand and thanked her for her hospitality
but politely declined the offer, tell her that there was much for them to do in making up for time
lost due to their family estrangement. Mrs. Gadsden had been thoroughly charmed by his cousin.
Even Aegnor had found himself smiling at his words, much to his own dismay.

They had taken to the trail that afternoon in relative silence, the only sound between them was the
cracking of twigs and leaves along the path. Not much time had passed since he had last been here
with Andrea but the change was noticeable. The trees that had once been clothed in green had
become a riot of color. Shades of red, orange, yellow and purple. The air was cooler with a tincture
of earthiness. Leaves of gold would pirouette down, spinning till it landed on the trail, the shiny vibrant color standing out against the amber and bronze beneath it. As the day began to wane and the night closed in, the trees took on a skeletal look and a chill crept into the air. Not the bite of winter blusters, but just a nip to let them know a new season is at hand.

Carnistir had said they needed to be somewhere near water. Aegnor would not bring him to where he and Andrea had first stayed, it seemed a sacrilege, that lake was sacred to him. But there were other large bodies of water they could go to and that seemed to suit Carnistir just fine.

Aegnor was not certain of the time when they had finally reached the water. The stars reflection resembled diamonds across a blue blanket. Carnistir stood at the edge of the outcrop that looked out over the water.

“This will do,” he said softly. “Set up camp, I will be back shortly.”

Aegnor opened his mouth protest but Carnistir had already melted into the shadows. Aegnor set about the task of starting a small fire while simultaneously going through the breathing exercises he had perfected through the years to keep from losing himself to the sadness. Only now he did it to keep from murdering his cousin.

He paused while he was laying out a blanket, his keen ears picking out a voice in the night. Was that singing? Aegnor strained to hear. It was faint and at a distance but every so often something would float in air across the water.

“– by water, wood, and hill … by ... willow ... harken now ... hear – ”

Was that Carnistir’s voice? Aegnor walked to the outcrop and looked over the water at the exact same spot where his cousin had stood. He stood so still one would have thought he was a part of the night. But he heard nothing. If it was Carnistir singing he could no longer hear him.

By the time Carnistir had returned, Aegnor had made himself quite comfortable. He lay upon a blanket on the ground, his head resting on the rolled up sleeping bag, staring up at the stars. It had been some time since he had last been in the wild, nothing but the lights of Ilúvatar as company. A sense of peace had come over him he had not felt for ages. Not even Carnistir could disturb him.

Carnistir sat down next to him with a sigh and began digging in his bag. After a moment he pulled out a flask and two small glasses, pouring golden liquid into each and offering one to Aegnor. Aegnor took his and upon sipping it, looked at Carnistir with surprise.

“I did not steal it from you, if that is what you are thinking,” he sniffed as he saw Aegnor’s reaction. “You are not the only who was capable of finding Miruvor.”

“I did not think that at all,” Aegnor lied as he looked down at his cup.

Carnistir simply arched his brow at him as he sipped at his own.

“Pity I never learned how to make it,” he finally said. “It never turns, you know. Never will either. I always try to snatch it up whenever I find it. Alas, that opportunity comes less and less as the years progress. Now I can only find it in the old country and usually under lock and key.”

Aegnor found himself nodding. “So much is lost,” he sighed.

“Probably for the best.” Carnistir threw back the rest of his drink before pouring another glass and topping off Aegnor’s. He then stoppered the flask and set it back in his bag before leaning back against his own bedroll. “Do you ever regret?”
Aegnor blinked and looked over at Carnistir. “What?”

“Do you ever regret?” he repeated. “Returning. Do you ever wish you had remained or perhaps returned instead to Aman?”

Aegnor sat silent for a moment before he spoke. The question had surprised him and yet he could hear the sincerity in his cousin’s voice.

“No,” he finally answered, “no I do not. I could find no healing in the great Hall and if I could not find it there then how could I find it in Aman. The only time I ever remember feeling true joy was while I was with … while I was not there. Besides, if I do start to miss it I will just fade quietly away and end up back as a faceless, bodiless void floating around listening to Námo prattle on for eternity.”

Carnistir looked at Aegnor for a moment before he barked out a laugh. “Hells Aegnor,” he guffawed, “that is practically blasphemy coming from you!”

“I suppose it is,” he chuckled.

“I could not exist in a world without Haleth,” Carnistir said after his laughter had finally died down. “I miss my brothers, I must admit. Of all my family, I would say I miss my mother most. She was always right … always.” Carnistir grew silent as he looked at the fire, his eyes like two pinpricks of light in the dark. “But I cannot imagine a world without Haleth.”

“How did you know you would find her?”

“I am not sure exactly,” his brow furrowed slightly in thought. “I believe that I had always felt her pull at me, even within the Halls. I felt something that kept grating at my being, clawing just below the surface.”

“Your brothers … did they know about …”

“Gods no,” he grunted, “although I think that Maedhros may have suspected. He always had a way of knowing the rest of us, of knowing the hearts of others.”

“He was a great Prince among his people,” Aegnor agreed.

“A lot of good it did him,” Carnistir muttered and leaned over to stoke the fire. “Still, if he did know he was willing to keep my secret which is more than I can say any of the others would have done.”

Aegnor looked over at Carnistir. “I was not aware things had become so … strained with your brothers.” Indeed, everything that Aegnor could remember about them was that they were close knit. Certainly they each had their own interests, but in all they only took each other’s council, even as children. Carnistir looked at Aegnor as he leaned back.

“Oh please. Do not pretend to tell me you did not see the strain. Curufin and Celegorm both had turned into little pricks, Eru only knows why. And Amras refused to have anything to do with anyone unless forced.”

Aegnor did not speak as Carnistir stared darkly into the fire. What was there to say? In truth, he agreed that his brothers were pricks. But then he thought Carnistir was one as well … did he not? He surprised himself when he spoke.

“They could not have become so bad as that. They had made questionable choices, but with the
best of intentions at heart.”

“Oh you think so?” Carnistir sneered with disgust. “Pity you cannot ask your brother if he feels the same way.” Carnistir sighed and pinched at the space on his between his eyes. He suddenly looked very tired to Aegnor. “Forgive me. I am being an ass.”

Aegnor did not know what Carnistir meant by that comment. Angrod had perished alongside him. Had something happened with Finrod or Orodreth that involved his brothers? Aegnor decided not to ask. Carnistir had apologized, which had been shocking enough.

They sat in silence a moment, nothing but the snap of the fire or the rustle of some animal in the dark to break the quiet. Aegnor lay back down against his blanket roll, fingers laced together behind his head as he looked up at the night sky.

“Earlier while you were gone,” he finally said, “I could have sworn I heard someone singing.”

Carnistir chuckled from where he lay, also staring up at the canopy of stars above them. “That is because you did. It was me.”

“You? Whatever for?”

“Well, I was trying to call someone.”

“By singing?”

“His wife like singing. His wife also likes the water. And since he seems to like anything his wife likes, it seemed like the best way to find him.”

“Who is he?”

“What is he might be a more appropriate question,” Carnistir mused.

“Really Carnistir if you don’t know then just say it,” groused Aegnor

“I just did!”

Aegnor sat up and glared at his cousin. “Just what in the hell have you gotten me into here Carnistir. Enough games. Why in Eru’s name were you down there singing.”

“I told you, his wife likes singing! God’s truth!” Carnistir threw his hands up in the air in exasperation. “It is the only way to find him. They are strange like that. Don’t concern yourself. We are not in any danger, not from him anyway. Truly I do not know much about him, other than he is very old. Likely older than both of us and is devoted to good. He has helped me before and I am hoping he will help me again.”

Aegnor glared at Carnistir for several more seconds before he lay down again. “Well, I don’t like it Carnistir. Not one bit. Does “he” have a name?”

Aegnor rolled over slightly so he could see his cousin when he did not answer. When he did, he saw Carnistir sitting up straight and peering into the dark towards the lake. He opened his mouth to speak when Carnistir raised his hand to silence him. It was then that he heard it. The light sound of laughter, like the tinkling of bells coming off the water.

Carnistir jumped up with Aegnor close behind him as they both made their way down the embankment. The sound of laughter came closer and Aegnor felt as if his fëa was lifted by the joy
the sound would bring. It was the sound of the red robin in the summer, it was the scent of the honey suckle in bloom. The air became lighter, warmer. The chill of fall was gone and spring was all around. But then that was impossible, was it not?

Carnistir stopped so abruptly that Aegnor almost ran into the back of him. They stood there waiting.

Out from the shadows, a woman appeared. At least Aegnor thought she had emerged as it seemed as if no shadow could touch the golden light that was all about her. Her yellow gold hair rippled down her shoulders; her gown was the green of the young reeds that lined the river and was speckled with silver beads like dew. A belt of gold set around her waist looked like a chain of lilies and forget-me-nots, while around her feet green grass and small white flowers appeared within the wake of her step. Her smile was warm and wide and so beautiful that Aegnor could not help but wonder if she were some elf queen that had remained behind. She came towards them, her arms open in welcome.

“Welcome dear folk and precious first children of the land! What joy it is to walk among you again. You are welcome, welcome guests!”

Her voice laid a spell upon him unlike any other. His heart moved with a joy he did not fully understand. The woman before him looked young, but Aegnor knew he was standing before something that was older than time itself. He found himself dumbfounded, frozen with awe by the being before him. It was Carnistir that was finally able to break him of his stupor. His cousin stepped forward and swept into a graceful bow.

“My heart is full of joy to be blessed to see you once again, my Lady Goldberry.”
Hayley has always been protective in regards to her own.

Whether in regards to possessions, passions, or loved ones, she has always had that protective streak when it came to the things that really mattered to her. She supposed one could say it had to do with her turbulent childhood. That may be true, to a degree. But Hayley also felt that it was just a part of her DNA.

It had been a bit of a trial for her and her brother growing up. They had moved here from Greenland but Hayley did not have much memory of that. She knew that was was her mother was from. That she had been Inuit, specifically Kalaallit, but also some Inughuit because it was in the northern territories where her parents had met. Her father had been stationed at Thule Air Base and had run into each other while she was visiting family. Hayley had vague memories of her father laughing at how her mother did not want to have anything to do with him in the beginning. There was some lingering animosity from the locals towards the base over how they came by the land. But then forcibly moving anyone from their homes rarely ever went well.

Eventually he won her over though and the rest, as they say, is history. A tragically brief history since her mother died shortly after she and her twin brother Hayden were born. It was shortly after that her father was discharged and moved them to the states, bringing them to New York.

Some might think it would be difficult, being raised without a mother. But Hayley did not think that way. While she would agree she had felt as if there had been a void in her life, like some missing piece to a long worked on puzzle that she could never finish, her father had loved them very much and worked hard to make up for that absence. He had been big and strong and had taught them to never be afraid of defending themselves or those who need it. Not that he encouraged them to go looking for a fight, but if one came to you despite all attempts at avoiding it, then always face it. Never let anyone back you into a corner. Her father had always been there for them when they were young. He had been her hero. And for a time, he had filled the void.

He had also been a member of New York City Fire Department Ladder Company 3 and had been swept away from her in a ball of fire, ash and an avalanche of twisted steel in 2001.

The void now became great gaping gulf in her life and it was then that the nightmares began. Horrific, warped, sadistic monsters with razor like claws and gnashing teeth invaded her dreams. She fought the monsters every night, and every night the monsters dragged her father down.

With the only family they had ever known taken away and very little known about her mother’s family, she and Hayden became wards of the state. They moved from one foster family to the next until they were 18, upon which both of them joined the service. It was the most logical choice for them at that time and worked. It gave them skills. It gave them a purpose. And for a while, the military filled that void with her blood, sweat and tears, making her too exhausted to focus on that emptiness while giving her laser focus on others. She and Hayden both served overseas. She had become proficient in hand to hand combat to the point that she was encouraged to compete. She had always made high marks with tactical skills and had been told on more than one occasion she could be officer material.

But despite her success, the void was always there, a lingering, nagging sensation. An itch that could never be scratched to satisfaction. It constantly pulled, reminding her that it remained while all others left, that it was unfulfilled and was going nowhere.
She and Hayden had not seen much of each other while serving but had always remained in contact. They had been through too much not too. At one point they both managed to take some leave at the same time and decided to visit the home of their mother. Through random means they had been able to track down members of her family and, after many letters and emails, found themselves nervously knocking on the door of a house in a town called Ilulissat.

There had been much hugging and crying that day.

But Hayley had discovered something, or perhaps found something. For her, to call the land beautiful would be inadequate. It went beyond words. The land was protected by walls of ice and ocean, with valleys surrounded by snow capped mountains. The only thing bigger than that range of granite peaks was the sky, clear blue and as vast as any eye could see. They had called to her, those mountains, speaking to her on a spiritual level. She would live in those mountains. She would know every inch of them. This place wrapped her in peace. She belonged here. She looked out at the round faces smiling up at her, reflections of her own. These were her people.

This is where she is meant to be. This is home.

And so, after eight years and two tours, she turned down the resigning bonus for the military and returned to civilian life. This time with purpose.

And for a little while, the nightmares ceased.

She decided she would use her benefits to go to school. Perhaps study something that she could use to help the community. Something where she could keep those who had no one, safe. And she found herself being pulled back to New York. It made sense really. She knew the city, and it would offer the most options for schools and jobs. And perhaps that little bit of her father within her wanted her to tuck those demons away and come to peace with her past. Even Hayden encouraged her to return. He had remained in the military and had even married and was now looking to be stationed back in the states, hopefully Virginia. They would be able to see each other again and Hayley could finally meet her sister-in-law. New York seemed to be the place she needed to be more and more.

Of course, Hayley now knew it was more than just coincidence.

Moving had turned out to be uneventful aside from the usual challenges. She had found herself a relatively decent apartment in Harlem. It was small and while not in the most desirable area, affordable. The location did not concern her. She had never been given any grief while she lived there and liked how it kept her on her toes. She settled in and began a routine. Even found a gym were she could work out and spar. But things did not always run smoothly.

Her nightmares had returned, although there was a change with them. Perhaps it was her new found sense of purpose, but she no longer fought alone in those dreams. Someone stood beside her, guarding her back. The dream had become so vivid that she thought she could feel the brush of wind against her cheek from his movements behind her, or that she would wake still feeling the sensation of his arm around her waist as he would sweep her aside.

And then there was that void she had always felt within. She had thought it had gone away after her epiphany in Greenland but she had been wrong. It had returned after she had moved to the city and its icy fingers raked at her more than ever. She had brushed it off at first some sort of malaise from moving back. The memories of her father and her childhood lost. But that had not been it. It was something else. Something unrelenting and continuous. There were times when she would leave her apartment and could not shake the persistent feeling that she was forgetting something, that something had been lost. At times the feeling was so overwhelming she would find herself
unconsciously looking around or squinting off into nothing trying to remember. These moments always ended with her having a splitting headache. It could get so bad that once she had missed her stop on the train and in her frustration, went to a small off street cafe to get a coffee and find some relief for her head. She had just sat down to drink it when, she felt more than saw, someone staring at her. When she looked up, her gaze landed on him immediately.

He sat at a table at the back of the room holding his own cup of coffee. He was dressed in a white shirt and black pants and an apron was tied around his waist. Some employee on break. He had long dark hair and striking grey eyes that seemed to be as startled by her as she was annoyed by him.

She had narrowed her eyes at him slightly in warning but instead of hastily looking away, his face split into a wide beautiful grin.

The sound of glass clinking brought pulled Hayley’s attention back to the here and now. So many things had changed since she met Cirian. So many things had fallen into place after she had found him. And not just for her. She looked across the room to see Andrea pouring wine in to glasses. Upon discovering that her friend was facing circumstances very similar to hers, Hayley could not help but become concerned. Andrea may be an old soul, but she was also a gentle one. And from she could tell, she was quite smitten with this Aegnor.

Agner. She had to remember that. His true name is Aegnor, but the name he goes by here is Agner. Just like Cirian, who she had known by many names in the past, but his true name was Caranthir.

Any way, once she had gotten the story from Cirian, Hayley could not help but be concerned. Their story had been tragic. Cirian had been vague on the details, saying that he was neither close nor interested in anything his cousins were up to during that time, but from what he did say Hayley knew that there had been no happy ending for either of them. Even Cirian had seemed troubled by what he had learned from talking to Agner.

Hayley had liked Agner very much for her part. She found him to be genuine and quite sincere, especially when it came to Andrea. She did not find him at all to be the pompous ass that Cirian said he was.

But then Cirian could be temperamental. Old habits die hard.

When Cirian told her that he and Agner had to leave for the woods sooner than expected, Hayley decided this would be a good time to drop in on her friend. Hayley felt it was a good thing to do. Not only because Andrea was her friend but because Agner had agreed to help Cirain. She was grateful that Cirian would not be alone.

Hayley heard the sound of footsteps and turned to see Andrea approaching with two glasses in hand. Hayley smiled. Her friend looked good, hell she was glowing. Her voice had a joyous and airy quality about it and her eyes practically sparkled.

“This is a pretty nice set up you have here.”

“Oh thanks,” Andrea said with a grin as she walked over to where Hayley stood and handed her a glass. “I mean, not much with square footage but the roof top balcony makes up for it. I hear the neighboring brownstone is up for sale. You should look into it.”

Hayley snorted into her own glass, almost spitting out the sip of her drink she had just taken. “I can’t with you right now,” she sputtered.
“Just a suggestion,” Andrea replied, feigning innocence as she walked over and took a seat on the sofa. Hayley followed and plopped down next to her.

“Seriously though,” Hayley continued, “is the entire building his?”

“I think so,” Andrea shrugged. “I mean, he only lives on the top floor, but the building is his. The bottom floors are all rentals.”

“Damn, he must make a killing.”

“You’d think right? But he actually as some sort of self imposed rent control on the place. There is a lady who has lived here since the early fifties and she still pays the same rent as when she moved in. He says he doesn’t need the money. He apparently owns a few buildings like this.”

Hayley sipped her wine. It made sense. Cirian did much of the same thing. Buying and selling buildings, passing them down to his “heirs”. He said it was becoming even easier with the internet. He did not even have to physically deal with people anymore. It was a nice building too. Spacious and simple with a classy type of comfy. Not at all like Cirian’s apartment in Hells Kitchen. He had always had a taste for the finer things.

“So,” Andrea looked at her from over her glass, “you and Cirian?”

Hayley blinked, suddenly remembering that Andrea did not know. Andrea had been surprised when Hayley had buzzed to come in, but nearly as surprised as when she found out that Hayley was with Cirian. When she had told Andrea that Cirian was the one who said she was staying here, Andrea had asked how she knew him. And when Hayley had told her they were living together, Andrea had about fell out on the floor.

“Mmmm, right. Me and Cirian.”

“Oh no you don’t. You are not going to clam up on me now. How did you meet? How long has this been going on? And what type of guy is he? I didn’t even know Agner had a cousin, much less one right here in the city.”

Hayley swirled the wine in her glass in an effort to buy some time. It was not that she did not want to tell Andrea everything. It was just that she was not sure of what all Andrea did and did not know. Agner said he was going to tell her and she believed him. But it was not like it was an easy subject to broach, and Hayley did not want to be the one to reveal anything.

“Well, let’s see. We met,” a series of images flashed through Hayley’s mind. A bloody field, a broken sword. The two of them setting fire to a pile of grotesque monsters, and another as they stood side by side to bury the dead. “It’s kind of typical really. Boy meets girl. Girl thinks boy is an ass. Boy hounds girl until she goes out with him. No big deal.”

“Really?” Andrea’s nose scrunched up with disappointment. “That’s it?”

Hayley shrugged. “It turns out we have known each other for a while actually, running into each other here and there. Just took a bit to figure it out.”

“Oh wow. Well that’s crazy. Almost as crazy as them being cousins and both of us dating them right? I mean small world right?”

“Crazy,” Hayley agreed. It seemed to her that if Andrea did know, then there would be no reason to keep such a thing a secret. The only answer it could be was that Agner had not told her yet. Hayley felt a small flicker of concern. She understood how difficult this would be. She hoped he would not
take long. Andrea was definitely taken with him and Hayley did not want to see her hurt.

“So tell me about him.”

Hayley gave Andrea a questioning look.

“Cirian,” Andrea gave an exasperated sigh, “tell me about him. I have only met him once and, while memorable, didn’t really tell me much.”

“Ah, ok. Well,” Hayley set her glass down on the table and raked her fingers through her short black hair, “how to describe Cirian. He ... can be a bit dramatic ...”

“No,” Andrea gasped, feigning shock. Hayley smirked.

“A bit,” she continued. “He tends to be somewhat reactive to things, kind of a temper. Nothing violent,” she interjected at Andrea’s sudden look of concern, “more like a tantrum really. But still emotional. But he can also be very ... sweet too. Gentle and kind. I think he just isn’t very comfortable showing it, that side of him. He is protective, sometimes annoyingly so, but I get it. He had some things happen when he was ... younger and I think that kind of changed him, or at least the choices he makes now.”

“Agner had said that he had some family he was not very close to when he was young. But then he doesn’t really talk about his family that much. I only guessed that Cirian was one of them. He didn’t seem happy when he saw him.”

“They weren’t close,” Hayley nodded, “Cirian said as much. And Agner was probably not happy to see him because he broke into his house. I’d be pissed too.”

“He told you about that?” Andrea looked surprised.

“It’s not very easy for him to hide things from me. He’s a shit liar.”

“Well he startled me,” Andrea laughed, “and Agner was definitely not happy, I know that for sure.”

“Rightfully so.”

“I’m glad though that they are doing this,” Andrea continued, “going on this trip. Agner doesn’t have any contact with his family. I think, not that I think Agner would ever admit it but, I think that he’s kind of ... I don’t want to say happy, but maybe, grateful? That doesn’t make sense does it?”

“It does,” Hayley leaned back against the sofa. “Cirian does too. And I know he would never admit it. But he does. They have too much in common and as for what happened in the past, I think they have both come to terms with it. They need each other more than they know.”

“Do you know what happened?”

Hayley blinked. She had spoke without thinking on that. It must be the wine.

“Not much,” she deflected. “From what I could gather it had to do more with their fathers than with them. They were just dumb kids carrying on a family grudge.”

Andrea sipped at her wine. “They look alike.”

“What?”
“They look alike,” Andrea repeated. “I mean, not exactly alike, but very similar. Their profiles. I noticed it that night. They were standing there talking, in that language and I noticed it. Their nose, and the color of their eyes.”

“They take after their grandfather,” Hayley said. “According to Cirian he looks more like his grandfather than Agner but his opinion could be a bit biased.”

“He sounds like a handful,” Andrea giggled.

“You have no idea.” Hayley sighed.

“Oh I don’t know. Agner has caused his share of headaches. It took us a while to get to this point. He was so reluctant to do anything at first but now, well ...” Andrea looked at Hayley and beamed, almost giddy, “he’s amazing. I have never felt this way Hayley. Ever. I mean, it’s like we know each other, but like we’ve always known each other you know? I know it sounds crazy, but if he were to ask me to marry him tomorrow, I would. I mean, don’t tell him that though. I don’t want to run him off.”

Hayley laughed. “I don’t think you will.”

“I don’t either but I am trying to be careful. I have never been this close to someone though. It’s like he knows what I am thinking. Do you know that once I had been thinking of him and had ended up getting on the train and going to where he was at work?”

Hayley looked at Andrea. “You did?”

“I don’t even remember doing it,” Andrea laughed. “I was so tired, that must have been it. We had just returned from the cabin and, well, it had been a good trip. I guess I was just thinking of him and the trip and my subconscious took over.”

“I guess.”

Andrea looked down into her wine glass, swirling the red liquid within. “And the sex ...”

Hayley’s heart dropped. “The sex?”

“It’s amazing!” Andrea squealed. “I had no idea it could be this way. I mean before Agner I was fine never doing it again to be honest. But with Agner, it’s like I can’t keep my hands off him. And I don’t want to either.”

Hayley suddenly sat up straight, causing Andrea to jump. “Andrea look at me.”

“What?”

“Just look at me!”

Before she even realized what she was doing, Hayley had grabbed Andrea by the sides of her face and peered fixedly into her friends eyes. She could feel her heart hammering as she studied the colors. Andrea’s eyes were grey with flecks of blue and green and even a streak of amber in once, but those were not the colors she was interested in. It was the light that shone deep from within, the faint glint that one would stupidly mistake for sparkling. It was him. Agner. The light from his being infused with Andrea’s own.

Hayley fought the rush of furious emotion that raged through her body.
“What? What is it,” Andrea protested in concern, pulling her face from Hayley’s hands. “Do I have something on my face? What?”

“No,” Hayley replied as she regained some semblance of control. “For some reason I just thought your eyes were hazel, not grey.”

“That’s it? God Hayley, next time just ask instead of scaring me half to death,” Andrea laughed.

“Sorry,” Hayley smiled apologetically. “You know me, always acting before thinking. So, where are these super cute kittens you want me to help you find families for?”

“Oh my God, I forgot! They’re in the back. Just a sec.”

Hayley smiled at Andrea as she simultaneously set down her glass and jumped up from the sofa. As soon as her friend was out of the room her smile disappeared.

He had bonded her. Without her knowledge.

That son of a bitch.

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The morning air was thick with the smell of fire and blood.

Black smoke rose high from the fires that still burned. There would be more fires to be lit as well, after last night’s killing. But not right now, not at this moment. This moment was for gathering the glorious dead. The fallen brothers. But she would not mourn. Not now. Not in front of her people. They had to see her strong and she would not falter.

Somehow, they had lived through seven nights of hell. Seven nights of sheer unwavering madness. She did not believe they would have survived another. She had made preparations accordingly for there could be no surrender. Not with this enemy. There would be only death. And she would rather it come from her hand than by their foe. For her hand would be far more merciful. The were backed into a corner and there could be no other way out.

That is why it had surprised her to see the enemy suddenly turn away. Morning was still a few hours away, they had to know her battlements would not stand much longer. Perhaps it was a trap. A lure for them to follow. The men were looking at her questioningly. It was up to her again.

She climbed to the top of the ramparts constructed from burnt timber and wagons and the mangled corpses of the enemy. They had hurled various body parts of her people that they had taken captive into the ramshackle fort they had constructed during those first nights of fighting. And so she had returned the favor in kind by using the mutilated flesh of her enemies like mortar for the walls of her battlements. Grotesque heads were set upon pikes and lit like torches in the night.

Several of the men protested as she made her way to the top of the ramparts, but they were silenced with a quick wave of the hand. They did not question her. Not anymore. She had saved their lives to many times. At one time, she might have been touched by their concern, but now it was simply a
nuisance. It was her duty, and her father had always said that one can only lead by example.

She stood above the fray and looked down at the battle field. It should not have been possible for her to stand so out in the open, but then the enemy was no longer interested in her or her people. They were scattered, high pitched squeals piercing the night as they ran in all directions, blind with fear at the cavalry that rode them down.

Elves. The bloody fucking elves had come.

They shone like a bright white flame in the night, swords flashing as they cut through panicked enemy line. Their armor seemed to reflect the light of the stars themselves with their intensity. It reminded her of glow flies that used to swarm the fields of her childhood.

“Pretty ...” a voice muttered beside her. She turned to see Betha standing next to her observing the battle. She simply grunted in reply. “What do we do.”

She sighed inwardly. For a brief glorious moment, she had forgotten these things were up to her now.

“Get Andir to gather anyone who can still stand and see to those who can’t. You will go to Clodagh and tell her that what we discussed will no longer be necessary.”

Betha gave a grim nod. Clodagh had been guarding with those who were either to old, to young, or to wounded to fight and knew that surrender was not an option.

A movement in the peripheral made both women look down to see one of those hell spawn’s pathetic attempt to escape by climbing the rampart. Betha moved to intercept but she waved her off.

“I will take care of this. You find Andir.”

Betha gave a quick salute and made her way down. She fought the urge to roll her eyes. She would have to do something about all the saluting and chieftain talk. She did not do anything that any of them would not have done. Her voice just happened to be the loudest. Still, she could not help but feel a small amount of pride as she watched Betha leap down from the ramparts. Even the women had taken up swords to fight. As they should. What else would they do? Stand there as their men were slaughtered. Better to die fighting. This was something she would not see end. The women will be able to defend their own alongside their men if they wish it. She would most certainly see to that. She had earned it. They all did.

She reached for the great ax that was strapped to her back, pulling it over her shoulder. It had been her father’s and for a short time after, her brother’s. Now it was hers. She looked down at the twisted creature that writhed at her feet. So many of her people had died at their hands. They had the dark one’s own luck but that would end tonight. At least when it came to her people. She swore to herself at that moment that she would give her own life to see them strong again. She would do what ever it took to see that they would be safe. They would never be caught unprepared in the dark again. She swung the great ax, severing the goblin’s head with one strike.

She hefted the ax back up, resting it on her shoulder, as she kicked the body. She watched it as it rolled limply down the rampart, stopping at the feet of a great warhorse. It was easily one of the most magnificent animals she had ever seen. It stood steadfast as the body stopped in front of it, not even a flinch. But it was nothing compared to the rider.

She had likened the other riders to the glow flies of her youth, whisking quickly across the fields,
illuminating the ground with their radiance. But this one was nothing like those. This one seemed to be lit by the heavens itself. This one had some how managed to capture the splendor of the stars themselves in his armor. Only the dark stains of the blood on his sword marred the brilliance. His face was obscured by his helm, but is eyes shone bright from within with an intensity that would rival the sun.

He must be their lord, or chief or king or whatever these bloody elves call the one in charge. She made a mental note to learn what to call him.

He continued to stare up at her saying nothing. If he was waiting for her to blink, it was not going to happen. Her own eyes may not shine like two little moons but they could certainly narrow in annoyance.

She was about to open her mouth to speak when he moved, acknowledging her with a respectful incline of his head. Uncertain of what to do, she returned with a curt one of her own. It seem to satisfy him for he turned his mount and trotted swiftly away, towards his men.

She watched him for a moment. It seemed that they were starting to set up some sort of a camp. She sighed. He would more than likely want some sort of homage or recompense or something like that for his aid. She could not help but wonder where the hell he was seven nights ago, when the worst of the attacks started. She grimaced inwardly at her pettiness. They had saved them, that was the truth of it. It would not hurt to give thanks.

But that was all they would get. She did not give a damn if he was the king of all the elves, that was all she would give. Her people are her priority now. They were a free peoples and nothing would take that from them, not even some bloody elf lord. She would protect them with her own life without hesitation. This was her family. They were all the family she had now.

And Haleth has always been protective in regards to her own.
Aegnor stood dumbfounded as Carnistir stepped forward and swept into a graceful bow.

“My heart is full of joy to be blessed to see you once again, my Lady Goldberry.”

Musical laughter rang out, causing the dark of the shadows to fall into a subtle retreat. “Caranthir Carnistir Morifínwë Fëanorian. Our heart sings to see you once more.” The Lady moved forward and enveloped Carnistir in a warm embrace and then pulled back and smoothed his hair as one would a wayward child. “Always happy are we to find your company for what was once one has now become two.” Bright blue eyes, deeper than any pool in Tirion, gazed at Aegnor.

“Yes my lady, I would introduce to you my blood kin, Aegnor Ambaráto Aikanáro.”

The Lady smiled and Aegnor could not help but catch his breath. “Son of Arafinwë Ingoldo, yes we know your family well. My husband and Lord once walked with your father along the hill of Túna, such beauty to be seen.”

“It pales in comparison to yours my lady,” Aegnor spoke the words without thinking, feeling clumsy and foolish. But the Lady simply smiled.

“Sweet words, like all your kin. But by the light in your eyes I see you are a child of the first age, for the fire of life burns hot within and your heart can only beat fierce and true although the ring in your voice tell me you are young yet again,” her voice flowed serene to his ears as her eyes sparkled like the morning sun on the water. All Aegnor could do was stand there as one struck dumb. “Come. You will come with me and we will wait. My lord will not be long. He heard your song but another voice pulled him with urgency. You will be guests of our house and wait in comfort.”

Carnistir bowed once more. “We are in your debt my lady.”

They followed the lady Goldberrry as she seemingly glided before them, leaving a path of lilies in her wake. The forest around them seem to grow even darker, the shadows of the trees lurked, watching them. White mists began to rise from the water and curled around the edges of the path, but did not cross.

Eventually they came upon a small cottage that backed up to a bubbling stream. Cobblestones spotted with primrose and lilies lined the walk way as wisteria and morning glories vines their way along the home. It seemed as if they had become suddenly brighter and Aegnor wondered if dawn had broke. Had they walked that long? The Lady opened the cottage door and gestured for them to follow.

“Enter please and be welcome first children of the land and descendants of Finwë Ñoldóran.”

The cabin was simple and unpretentious, while simultaneously warm and inviting. Bright beams of light shone through the window, illuminating the room. Two large upholstered chairs sat in front of a large stone fireplace where a small teapot hung over the fire. A second set of much plainer chairs sat next to a table in an opposite corner of the room where cabinets lined the walls. Large wooden beams draped with vines with small delicate flowers ran along the ceiling, along
with various herbs and plants that seemed to be hung up to dry. It gave the cabin an earthy floral scent that only seemed to emphasize the dream-like atmosphere. Aegnor watched the lady Goldberry as she hummed softly to herself while rummaging through the cabinets.

“Who ... what is she,” he asked softly.

“She ...” Carnistir paused as if to think about the question, “is the River-woman’s daughter.”

“She is not just some simple river-woman’s daughter. She could be ... for a moment I had thought she was one of the Eldar.”

“I never said she was simple,” Carnistir sniffed dismissively, “she is anything but simple. Neither of them are. They have had many names. Men who have crossed them would call them fays or fairyfolk, spirits of mythology. While the lady in the past went by the Jenny Greenteeth or Peg in the old country. Although the stories told are menacing, that has never been her way.”

Aegnor’s confusion must have been plain on her face for Carrnistir gave a short sigh of annoyance before speaking once more. “You have seen her, heard her voice, yes? For the eldar it is a soothing, joyous feeling, but for Men it is nothing short of hypnotic. They would follow the sound anywhere, even to their death.”

Aegnor stamped his own annoyance at his cousin down as he thought about Carnistir’s words. It made sense. He was not sure if he could not follow her himself if she were to ask. “And her husband?”

“Tom ...” Carnistir began with small thoughtful smile, “is a little more complicated. I believe he was called Larwain Ben-adar by the Moriquendi and Forn by the dwarves. Men once called him Orald but that was some time ago. They also called him the Greenman or Jack in the Green or Nym in the old country of Men. They worshiped him as a god at one time, although he never desired it. He is master of wood, water and hill. The first time I ever met him, well, stumbled across him actually, it was an accident. He found me in truth.”

“But what is he,” Aegnor mumbled soft to himself.

“He is,” a soft voice answered from behind him.

Aegnor and Carnistir spun around to see Goldberry smiling behind them, a cup in each hand. Aegnor’s face went warm from embarrassment and he stumbled out an apology as he took a cup from her hand. If she were bothered at all by their discussion of who or what she and her husband were, she did not show it. The Lady simply smiled and placed a gentle reassuring hand against Aegnor’s cheek. Aegnor suddenly thought of his mother.

“Come,” she soothed, “and we shall sit by the fire. He will be along soon now.”

Aegnor blinked with surprise to find that he was already sitting in a large comfortable chair along with Carnistir next to him, sipping from his cup as if they had not just been standing a moment ago. Goldberry glided around them and took a seat in one of the other upholstered chairs in front of the fire, humming softly. Aegnor’s brows came together slightly. He had thought there had only been two chairs earlier, not four.

I myself believe they are one of the Ainur or perhaps a Maia gone rogue.”

“That’s impossible,” Aegnor replied.

“Is it,” quipped Carnistir. “I mean, it is not as if it would be the first time that has happened. Why not? I do not know much about him. What I do know is he is not of this world or our world or
any other world there is out there, and yet he is somehow tied to them all.”

“It still does not answer the question of who or what he is,” said Aegnor.

“Why Tom’s a merrry fellow!” A voice boomed from the doorway, startling Aegnor as he tried not to spill his drink in his lap. “His jacket blue and his boots yellow,” the voice booming voice continued with a laugh. “Ah, I’ve never liked that song but it seems to sum it up nicely.”

Aegnor struggled to focus on the figure that now made his way across the room. He was indeed wearing a bright blue coat and high yellow boots and holding a large tray of lilies, but that seemed to be the only thing that Aegnor could be certain of. As Tom made his way across the room, he tossed the old worn hat he had been wearing to he side as he bowed reverently over Goldberry’s hand, kissing it tenderly and presenting the lilies to her. But when he stood up straight, he was now wearing a crown of laurels across his brow. When had he put that on? And it had seemed to Aegnor that he was rather short in stature as he greeted his wife, but now that he was pulling Carnistir into a friendly embrace, he seemed taller. Aegnor squeezed his eyes shut for the briefest of moments to focus, only to open them up and find this enigma of a man now in front of him.

He had a welcoming smile and ruddy cheeks beneath his dark brown beard. His hair was thick and wavy and tied back with a loose piece of string. But it was his eyes that stunned Aegnor to stillness. They were a bright blue but it was not the color that was remarkable. It was the light within them. The light of Aman. This man, this being before him, had seen the light of the two trees.

“And this fellow? Another child of the One,” Tom laughed, “once lost, now found. Warms ol’ Tom’s heart to see you, warms his heart it does.”

Aegnor stood up and realized that he was much taller than Tom. It was his presence that somehow made him bigger. He place his hand to his heart and bowed low. “It is an honor sir, to make your acquaintance and step beneath your roof. I am Aegnor Aikanaro Ambarato. Son of Finarfin.”

Aegnor did not know he had introduced himself so formally. It somehow seemed appropriate, at least at the time. But as he straightened back up he saw Carnistir had a little smirk and that Tom’s eyes had widened in surprise. Aegnor could feel his face go red.

“Ahoo, well, well! Such manners for one so young! Sit, Sit.”

Aegnor blinked and found he was sitting again, cup once more full in hand. He took a slow breath to fight the disorientation that followed. Carnistir leaned over to him.

“You get used to it,” his cousin whispered. Aegnor’s embarrassment was replace with relief to know that he was not losing his mind. Carnistir must be experiencing the same feelings as well.

“Son of Finarfin, I be knowing your father,” Tom said from where he now sat. Aegnor did not remember how he got there and did not try. “Once walked the dark shores of Ekkaia with and spoke of troubles. But those times are far and away, unless you bring troubles of your own.” Tom turned to Carnistir and gave him a curious look. “Was it you who brought this once more into the world?”

Aegnor looked down and gave a startled little gasp in spite of himself. On the floor between them was the sword out of its wrappings and the blade exposed. Aegnor began to move to cover it before it could speak, such dark words would be a sacrilege in this place and sinful before the Lady Goldberry, but the voices never came. He looked at the sword and waited. Surely it would begin
its cries any moment now, hissing and cursing at fate and begging for blood. But there was nothing. The black blade still gleamed with a pale fire, but it was dim, as if it slept. Aegnor looked at Carnistir who could not hide his surprise either.

“It’s name is Anguirel and comes from a dark heart,” Tom said as he frowned slightly at the sword between them. “Has a mate called Anglachel, but it’s fate is elsewhere. I could hear it calling in the wood from afar. Don’t you know the trees themselves cried for me to save them. How’d you come by such an angry thing,” Tom asked Carnistir.

“He had it,” Carnistir replied with a flick of his hand towards Aegnor. Aegnor glared at his cousin as Tom turned his gaze towards him.

Aegnor cleared his throat. “I ... it was given to me, for safe keeping. Those who found it could not hear it but knew that there was a malice to it. I took it to keep those who would be tempted from using it, not knowing what it was capable of.”

Tom considered his words. “Wise that was. Men are easily tempted. But no fear, ol’ Tom knows you are pure of heart and devoted to good. It will be sensitive to the will of the wielder and serve you.” Tom turned to Carnistir with a sigh. “I’m supposing you want to use it against a dark servant?”

“Will it work? Against her, will it work,” Carnistir asked cryptically.

“A blade brings death to anything when it strikes correctly. But enough talk of dark things. How long its been since I’ve seen you children walking the land. Makes my heart long for younger days. Come, let’s speak of a time before war and strife and sing songs of love and life.”

This response was not the one that Carnistir had wanted but he seemed to resign himself to humor their host so quickly that Aegnor believed his cousin must have expected this to happen. Aegnor did not mind as much. He enjoyed speaking of when then first came to Arda and the wildness of the lands. He was not surprised to find that Carnistir’s father had come across Tom in the past. His uncle had a penchant for discovering the unexpected and keeping it secret. Aegnor had been surprised to find that he knew his father though, having walked the far western shores of Arda with him. Aegnor wondered what would possess his father to journey so far?

At times their host would break into song. He had a deep resonate voice that Aegnor found soothing and quite pleasant to listen too. He would sing of rolling hills and the river woman’s daughter. He sang of small folk who lived in the ground and white trees. Sometimes though, the songs would take on a mournful tone and Tom would speak of the changing world and land. Lamenting that it was becoming so there was no place for nature in the world and feared what would come to Men in the end. He spoke of the old shepherds who used to look after the forests and how now those that were left could be counted on one hand and rarely moved anymore. Not even to disperse the wights that would plague their land.

Carnistir had listened quietly as the conversation would shift to song and then back to story. But upon mention of the wights he leaned in once more.

“They are becoming brave to show themselves with frequency,” he said, “or perhaps they are being prompted.”

“I be knowing of who you speak,” Tom answered with a smile, “and perhaps you’re right. She is troublesome.”

“She is a blight Tom, and must be stopped.”
“Who is she,” Aegnor blurted out, exasperated by the side speak.

Tom look at him in surprise. “Why she is nefarious, solitary and loveless. Berruthiel is her name and she is the queen of cats.”

Aegnor looked at Carnistir. “Beruthiel. Have you any memory of this name?”

“None,” Carnistir replied. “It must have been after ... well, you know. Anyway, she sounds charming.”

“Ahaha! Charming,” Tom bellowed with laughter. “Why, even old man willow would hike up his skirts a-running! But now my fellows, we eat. Come, come around the table. Goldberry is waiting!”

Aegnor turned to see that the small table in the corner of the room was now laden with food and four chairs around it. Where had the other two chairs come from?

The food brought long lost memories of Aegnor’s childhood to the fore. Honeycomb, fresh bread with butter, cream and pudding, treats he had not seen since he was a child. Tom laughed and sang as they ate and Aegnor found himself smiling right along with him. It reminded of a time he and his brothers spent in the company of several Maia of Oromë in their youth. Aegnor had even spent some time with Carnistir’s brothers, Tyelkormo and Curufinwe, hunting the fields of Oromë for game. They had been close at one time. At least, they had been as close as one from that family would allow. The memory caused Aegnor to suddenly realize that he had no memory of Carnistir joining them on such outings. Large family gatherings certainly, but not the social calls that many of his brothers would partake in. Maitimo and Fingon had been close and occasionally Makalaure with them. And even Irisse and Angarato would join in on the hunts. But as far as Aegnor could remember, Carnistir had never shown any interest.

The cousin sat across from him at the table now, was an entirely different beast. He listened patiently to the nonsensical ramblings of their host, even interjecting a few songs of his own. When he caught Aegnor looking at him with open surprise, he simply rolled his eyes and clicked his tongue dismissively at Aegnor.

“We all took music lessons you know. Some of us just did not like the spot light as much as others.”

Still, Aegnor could see there was some disappointment in Carnistir’s reactions. He obviously wanted Tom to help them with their quest, but the little man was not having it.

“You know that’s not a-happening,” he chided Carnistir gently, “ol’ Tom isn’t one for that. He’ll help you in need, yes he will, but not that. Tom has his own house to mind. You know to call if you find yourself in a spot again.” Tom leapt to his feet and sang out in a clear and booming voice:

“Ho! Tom Baombadil, Tom Bombadillo!
By water, wood and hill, by reed and willow,
By fire, sun and moon, hearten now and hear us!
Come, Tom Bombadil, for our need is near us!”

Aegnor had a strange nagging feeling that he had already heard this before, realizing it was the song he had heard Carnistir singing by the lake earlier in the evening.
Carnistir stood up and opened his mouth to speak, only to be silenced by Tom’s sudden stillness. Gone was the mirth and nonsensical songs of just moments ago. The air in the room seemed to take on a burden so heavy that even Aegnor could feel it press against his person. Tom turned to face them, his eyes still bright but solemn.

“You children must go on now, ol’ Tom’s been selfish and kept ya too long. Did my heart some good to see you again, but you must be a-going.” Tom looked at Carnistir and then to Aegnor. “She’s closer than your a-thinkin and she knows about you, the both of you. Up to no good that one. The sword will do, although not the way you think. But now you must go. They’re worried about you. Yes, ol’ Tom kept you too long.”

A low slow creaking sound came from behind Aegnor and he turned to see the door to the cabin slowly opening, revealing what looked to be their campsite just outside except that it was covered with a thin layer of snow. Aegnor turned back to find the cabin dark, the fire gone out and Tom and Goldberry gone. Carnistir sighed.

“Come on,” he muttered as he walked out the door.

“What just happened,” Aegnor asked, following his cousin out the door. He walked out into the cold crisp morning air, his boots crunching in the snow. Aegnor looked around in amazement only to find that the cabin had now disappeared as well. “What the hell just happened?”

“He told us what he thought we needed to know,” Carnistir grumbled as he gathered up their scattered items and began thrusting them into the packs.

“What we needed to know,” Aegnor said as he began to gather up belongings as well. “And what was that? The song?”

“We know that the sword will kill her, she is closer than I thought and is aware that we are coming ... and we might be in trouble.”

Aegnor stopped mid grab and looked at Carnistir. The first part he spoke in typical Carnistir style, condescending and dismissive. But the last bit had come out more or less muttered under his breath, as if talking to himself. Or he did not want Aegnor to hear.

“What do you mean-”

“I mean we don’t have time to do this,” Carnistir interrupted, “not now. We need to get back to the cabin. I can’t get a fucking signal out here.”

Aegnor resisted the urge to walk over and slam his cousin to the ground and resumed gathering his things from beneath the snow. When did it snow? Had a cold front blown through during the night? Aegnor could not remember hearing anything about one that was coming this way.

The morning sun was dim on the horizon by the time they left, hidden behind an overcast sky. A chill that would have been noticeable to anyone else was in the air, but it did not slow the two of them down. Aegnor was not fond of the cold, but this was nothing to cause any concern for him. In truth the cold barely touched them. It was the deeply buried memories that the glaring sheets of white before them would dredge up that Aegnor despised.

Carnistir set a quick pace back to the cabin which was fine with Aegnor. The snow began to melt away the closer they came to the main trail, giving away to the crack of dried out twigs and the last of the dead leaves that littered the path. The barren limbs of the trees reached their spindly fingers towards the grey morning sky. And yet something was not right, something that Aegnor
Upon reaching the cabin, Carnistir immediately set down his pack and began to rummage for what Aegnor assumed was his cellphone. He ignored his cousin and made his way into the inside only to go still when he opened the door. Nothing looked amiss. In fact everything was exactly as it was when they left. Except it was dark inside and Aegnor remembered leaving a light on for when they returned, and the air in the cabin was almost as chilled as the air outside. Which did not make sense since the heat would have kicked on with the onset of the cold front. Unless it was shut off. And Aegnor did not remember doing anything like that. Had someone come in their absence and shut the breaker off? It was possible since no one other than Andrea would know they were out here. Perhaps one of the caretakers had come by to check the cabin due to the sudden change in weather.

Something did not seem right.

Aegnor could hear Carnistir muttering outside but paid him no heed. This feeling that gnawed at him, made him feel as if he were missing something, unnerved him to no end. He decided to open himself to the bond. It would only be for a second, just to make sure Andrea was all right. He was not prepared.

A wave of bitterness swept over him as soon as he opened himself up, causing him to unconsciously step back. She has been crying. Andrea has been crying a lot.

Aegnor ran immediately for his bag and retrieved his own cellphone only to find it dead. How did that happen? Yes, it had been left out in the elements but the case was weather proof and it had only been one night. He needed desperately to get to a phone. He had to call Andrea. Aegnor ran back outside, shouting for his cousin.

“Carnistir,” he shouted as he made his way to the porch, “Carnistir! I need your phone! I have to call Andrea now. Carnistir!

Aegnor stepped outside to see his cousin sitting on the porch swing, slowly moving back and forth, with a strange expression as he chewed at his bottom lip. “You should probably check your messages,” was all he said.

“I can’t,” Aegnor replied irritated, “my phone is dead from being left out all night.”

“Yeah about that,” Carnistir said with a slight grimace, “that’s not why your phone is dead. I mean that might be part of it but not the main reason.”

“What? Carnistir, I don’t have time-”

“Yes! Exactly. You see, speaking of time, time doesn’t really work the same with Tom -”

“- for this right now. Please -”

“What could seem like just a few hours with him -”

“- I’m begging you, just let me use -”

“- could be days in our world. Weeks even.”

“- your phone, just this once -”

“Eight weeks to be precise.”
“- to call Andrea ... what ....”

“We have been gone ... eight weeks.”

Aegnor looked at Carnistir in stunned silence as he tried to grasp what his cousin just told him. They have been gone for eight weeks?

“That’s impossible,” Aegnor protested incredulously.

“Not really, you see Tom sort of exists on this entirely other plane. Time has no meaning for him. It’s always spring. What could seem like an hour in his reality could be days or even -”

Carnistir was speaking but Aegnor could not really hear him. He knew what his cousin had said was true before the words ever left his mouth. That nagging feeling that something was off. When they had first walked out from the cabin, they were at the peak of fall. The trees were dressed in reds, orange, and gold. The sun was still bright and warm. But now they sky was turning winter grey. The trees had long shed their fall foliage. They had been gone for eight weeks without a word to anyone. Andrea had not heard anything from him in all this time. Aegnor looked at his cousin who was still talking.

“- the first time I met Tom after my return, I was unknowingly with him for almost a year. Can you imagine? Why I -ack!”

Aegnor grabbed Carnistir by his collar and slammed him against the wall of the cabin, causing it to shake to the foundation and something to fall from the walls inside.

“Eight weeks!” He shouted.

“Now Aegnor -” Carnistir wheezed, finding it hard to speak with Aegnor’s hands around his throat.

“Eight Weeks! We’ve been gone eight weeks! And you just now decide to inform me?! This was not something you thought you should mention earlier,” Aegnor yelled.

Carnistir tried to speak between gasps for air. “I didn’t ... I didn’t think ...”

“I know you didn’t think Carnistir! You never do! Not about anything other than yourself that is! Do you know the trouble you have caused? Do you have any idea what you have done?”

“I ... I ....had hoped ... we wouldn’t ... Aegnor ... please ... I’m sorry ....”

Aegnor’s hands tightened on his cousin’s neck till Carnistir’s eyes began to roll back. Carnistir could have resisted, he could have fought back, but instead he did nothing. Aegnor released his grip and Carnistir dropped to the floor, simultaneously gagging and sucking in breath. Aegnor could not remember the last time he had felt such anger. His temples throbbed as his blood rushed and his hands clenched into tight fists. Carnistir slowly began to rise.

“I ... am sorry Aegnor ... I truly am. I did not ... mean ... for that to happen. It is something ... I have no control over. I had to take the risk. Please, I am sorry. I ask, no, I beg for your forgiveness ... please.”

Aegnor looked at the hand that Carnistir extended out to him in apology. Aegnor felt that his cousin was being sincere, but with Carnistir it could be hard to tell. Still, in all of his memories, Aegnor could not recall one where Carnistir apologized. But eight weeks ....
In a final burst of rage Aegnor swung and connected a balled fist with Carnistir’s chin, sending him sprawling down the porch steps. Aegnor then took a deep breath and took control of his rage. He walked down the porch steps and extended his hand out.

Carnistir struggled for a moment to sit up as he rubbed his chin and spit out a mouthful of blood. He eyes Aegnor’s hand suspiciously for a brief second before accepting the help. Aegnor hauled him to his feet.

“You should have informed me of this,” he said.

“Fair enough,” Carnistir replied, eyeing him warily. “Shall we go?”

“Immediately,” answered Aegnor.

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